Sensates of SHIELD

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Sensates of SHIELD

by Book_freak

Summary

Season 1 AU, SHIELD agents are Sensate, sharing a mind within each cluster, feeling each other's emotions, thoughts, and abilities. (NOTE: You do not need to have watched sense8 to read this)

Notes

First fic that's longer than a couple of chapters in YEARS! This is exciting. And scary.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: Prologue

It really wasn't the time for this. Melinda knew that she should have done it sooner, but she had been putting it off. Now the world was ending, and whoever these kids were, they *needed* each other. However inexperienced, regardless of how much this would shock them, because any one of them could be in the middle of a firefight and need help. They needed to look after their own.

“Melinda.”

“Phil.” She turned from the locked basement room she had barricaded herself into for the process. “You should be worrying about the Avengers.”

“I can worry about you too.” He put one hand over hers. “Things are a bit messed up here, I think Tori's got the Hub under control. Wherever these kids are, some of them will need help from whatever's coming next.”

Melinda shifted, readying herself for the pain that she knew would come. “Izzy's there, you two need to look out for each other.” Faint alarms blared in Phil's ears and Melinda looked around the helicarrier to see. “What's going on?”

“I don't know.” Phil sounded tense, “I should-”

“Go.” Melinda said, pushing him away. “You look after the Avengers. They're not the only ones with superpowers.”

Phil pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I love you.”

And he was gone.

Melinda gritted her teeth, forcing her breaths in and out through the pain that was building inside her like a wave. The pressure rose, and as it did she could see flickers. A van, with some broken hard drives. Vials of some kind of chemical. A pile of greased parts.

'Even I don't know what it does.' What?

Melinda pushed it from her mind, concentrating on the new cluster that was being born, born to *her*. The next one looked like the cockpit of a quinjet-

The view of whatever she had been looking at was shattered by ice-cold pain, an inhuman scream coming from her mouth as she convulsed from the agony in her chest.

No.

Not *her* chest.

She was there with him now. “Phil?”

He pulled the trigger and sent the demi-god crashing through the helicarrier wall. Melinda could tell from the blood that it was fatal. “Melinda.” He smiled despite himself.

Now the others were there too.

“Guess the girls won out after all.”

“Don't say that Phil.” Izzy said, crouching to grasp his hand.

“Come on. We can't-” He coughed drily. “I'm clocking out here.” His gaze was on Isabelle now.

“Not an option.” Victoria said firmly, also kneeling to his level, tears in her eyes.

Phil wasn't going to cry. He needed them to be okay. “It's okay guys.” He smiled weakly. “New kids will need you. And the Avengers... This was never gonna work- not unless they had something to- to-”

All of a sudden Melinda was back in the musty basement of the Triskellion, curled into a ball on the floor. He was gone.

Phil was gone.

She couldn't feel him anymore, he was nowhere. His warmth, his love, his feelings, his abilities, his sights and smells. His... everything.

He was *gone*.

Chapter 2: Funeral

Chapter Summary

The funeral.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izzy stood tall and did her damnedest not to let on. She was broken inside, again. This was far from the first time she had lost someone, but someone in her cluster? That was something else entirely. The first member they had lost had been awful. No amount of joined knowledge and skills could save you from the firing squad. Soon after that another member of their cluster had killed themselves, though Izzy was still numb from the first.

Phil though- she pressed her lips together. *Phil.* He was Phil. Sweet, teasing, dorky Phil. He had always been so bright. Now he was gone.

“Tori?” She found herself in the Hub, standing behind one of her only cluster members that remained. “Tori?”

“We've got a job to do Izzy.” Victoria muttered coldly, forcing herself too to keep standing. “You more than the rest of us. The Avengers need to make this worth it.”

“It's not worth it.” Melinda mumbled from the ground. “Nothing is worth this, not again.”

“Melinda, get up.” Victoria and Melinda had used to butt heads a lot, their matching stubborn personalities clashing. “It definitely won't be worth it if you don't *fight.”*

“I lost them!” Melinda hissed, “Don't you get it? I LOST them! I lost *Phil.”*

The other two women froze, barely understanding what Melinda meant, but alarms were blaring in three locations at once, as well as wind roaring past Izzy's face and gunfire from outside Victoria's door. “We can't do this now.” Izzy said urgently. “We can't lose anyone else, got it? We're on a mission.”

Melinda stood, tall and rigid. Missions she could do. Missions were

what she did. “Let's go then.” She said firmly, and she disappeared.

Izzy forced herself back to the helicarrier. This was a mess to fix. A battle to win. For Coulson.

Skye snagged one of the sandwiches from the clueless kid working the back in the cafe, and ducked back into her van. He was about to throw them away anyway, she told the kid, and hey, Skye knew exactly the kind of smile to shoot that guy to get what she wanted. Living on the streets for a good few years now had taught her a few tricks.

She sat down on the roll up mattress and pile of pillows she called a bed, munching on her stale sandwich. No progress on SHIELD's mainframe, even though they were all distracted by aliens falling from the sky.

Instead Skye had decided to use her skills diverting funds from some kind of right-wing political campaign to the New York fire department, as well as making a few anonymous donations towards rebuilding the city from some unwitting philanthropists. They would need it.

Now the sun had gone down and it was getting dark quickly. Skye knew that her little battery powered lamp wouldn't last too long, so she kicked off her shoes and shod her bra, curling up under her pile of bed once she had triple checked that her van door was properly locked.

She closed her eyes, willing sleep to come. When Skye drew her next breath though, it felt dusty.

She coughed.

When Skye opened her eyes, she wasn't in her van any more.

She was in some windowless room that was filled with dust and old filing cabinets. She pushed herself into a sitting position to look around. *What the hell?*

There was a woman, Skye noticed. Curled up into a ball on the other side of the room. “Hello?”

The woman looked up. She was crying, Skye noticed. When their eyes made contact, she snapped back, and she was back in her blanket nest in her van.

Skye shook herself. She had weird dreams when she was half asleep.

“What do you mean, you lost them?!”

“What do you think I mean Izzy?” They probably shouldn't be doing this now.

“How can you *lose* a cluster?”

“Well when you're being stabbed it's hard to keep track!” Melinda snapped.

All of a sudden the fight in both of them was lost. Their arms sagged at their sides and their faces fell.

“What are we gonna do?” Izzy asked, eyes on the floor.

“I don't know.” Melinda mumbled, tears creeping from her eyes. “He-” She tried again, “He'd want us to find them.”

“How many did you see?”

“I don't know.” Melinda admitted. “Three- maybe four.” She swallowed. “I can't see them now.”

“It'll come.” Izzy didn't know how Phil did it. The pang was back, the absolute *darkness* where his presence once had been. “Mel-” Without taking a step their arms were wrapped around each other, Tori joining them a moment later. None said a word. There was no need. Thoughts, emotions, wishes, the sheer *wrongness* of this whole thing overcame them. Their group hugs had felt too small for years. Now it barely constituted a group.

“There was a lab.” Melinda said softly. “SHIELD I think. The logos were on the beakers.”

“Anything else?” Victoria asked softly.

“Some computer parts. Gears. Maybe a plane.”

“Not much.” Isabelle mumbled.

“We'll find out more.” Tori said. “The longer it's open the more we'll know. Mel can find out more, and we only really need to find one of them.”

“We don't even know how many there are.” Melinda lamented.

“Eight's most common.”

“With what happened?”

“Until we know more about that then we should assume there are eight.” Victoria said firmly.

Izzy grimaced. “What about Peggy?”

“Best to try in person, with how she's been lately.” Melinda said.

“I can search through the lab mainframe to see what I can find.” Victoria offered.

“Finding the ones who are talking to themselves in sci-tech. *Sure.”*

Leopold Fitz groaned in frustration when his questing hand couldn't find his three millimetre flathead screwdriver. “Where'd I leave the damn thing?” He muttered in frustration.

“Since you were working on Bashful yesterday, probably by him.” His best friend's voice supplied patiently.

He smiled. “Thanks Simmons.” Then he paused and turned. “Aren't you supposed to be assisting Doctor Newling with his research project today?”

Simmons took a step backwards, now looking around. “I- am. What are you doing here?”

“Here- this is *our lab* Jemma, what do you-”

Both were suddenly hit by a cold chill and instinctively moved closer together.

Jemma spotted the figure first, and stepped forwards despite Fitz's restraining arm. “Are you alright?” She asked, concerned.

Fitz glanced around, scuffing at a pile of dust with his shoe.

Melinda glanced up, and what she saw in that moment almost made her smile. There were two of them. Together. They wouldn't be alone.

Fitz jumped, finding himself back in his usual, well lit lab. He spun

around. “Simmons?”

There was no response other than the snickering of other agents. He ignored them, instead opting to glance down at his shoe. Odd. It had felt very real, yet there was no trace of the dust.

“Mel.” A soft voice roused her. “It's time to go.” She was curled up on the couch, having failed to find the motivation to even get a blanket from her bed.

“No.” She mumbled stubbornly. “There's no point. I already know he's gone.”

Tori appeared, furious, grabbing her arm. “For Gods sake Melinda, stop being selfish! Do you think Phil would want you to do this? Would he want you to sit here and feel sorry for yourself?”

Melinda swung around with her other arm, punching her in the nose. “*Who cares?*” She snarled, not reacting as Tori stumbled back. “Who cares what Phil would have wanted? He's *gone* Tori, it doesn't matter anymore!”

“That's enough!”

They stopped at the familiar voice. “Is this really what you've been reduced to? Violence in your own cluster?”

They all stared. Tori regained her voice first. “Peggy.” She said shakily, “We-”

Peggy held up a hand. “I know. You have all been through this far too many times. But don't lose what little you have left. Clusters are made to be together.”

A blink later she was gone. Tori sniffed, feeling her nose. “Peggy?” She called, but they both knew that they couldn't reach her.

Tori glanced at her hand, and was surprised to see no blood. Melinda hadn't been holding back, she could feel that. She looked back to her, realising what that meant.

Melinda felt her understanding and looked away. “I can't do it.” She felt sick. “Tori- I-I can't get up.”

Victoria swallowed, crouching beside her, suddenly feeling ashamed. “Come with me then.” She whispered. “Let me in and I'll take you

with me."

Even if she couldn't feel the fear through their connection, Tori would have seen it in her eyes. "I won't look. Do it for Phil, Melinda. More than anything he wanted you to let us in."

Melinda felt the bile rising in her throat. She wished she could. She wished she wasn't such a coward that she would rather protect herself, keep the others from seeing what she really was, than say goodbye to Phil. Rather lock herself away than do what he would have wanted her to do.

"Mel?" Izzy was there now, and she gently brushed her hand. "It's okay. We still love you." She tried to project it through their tiny cluster, but Melinda was as closed off as ever. She sighed. "We'll be there." She said, "If you change your mind."

Melinda was silent. She hated herself for it.

It was a beautiful spring day. Birds sang, flowers bloomed, the sun shone, and there was a sweet smell in the air. Tori and Izzy stood side by side. "He would have liked this." Izzy murmured.

Tori watched the other agents going up to pay their respects. "He always loved spring."

"Season of new beginnings." Izzy murmured. "He never wanted to accept that things had to die in winter for spring to happen."

"Because he was a hero." Tori murmured, eyes fixed on the gravestone under the tree with the hanging leaves. "Idealistic idiot."

Both stiffened fractionally when they felt a consciousness gently nudging theirs. They knew that Melinda was visiting, but also knew that to acknowledge it would send her right back to wallowing in misery on her couch. "We need to find those kids." Tori murmured. "He wanted us to. So many of us have been dying."

"Doesn't take away the sting though." Izzy said, wishing that the pain would let her cry. They had lost so many people now. "Do you ever wish that we weren't... like this?"

Tori caught her eye. "No." She said firmly. "I wish *they* weren't like that."

Izzy made a weak attempt at a smile as Natasha and Clint approached them. “Hey.” She greeted, feeling Melinda flicker away. “You guys okay?”

Clint's ever-present grin was conspicuously absent. “I mean, took down an alien invasion, but that's just par for the course, right?”

Natasha looked down. “I'm sorry I couldn't protect him.” She murmured, getting right to the point.

Izzy swallowed. “It's okay Nat.” She said, “It wasn't your fault.”

Clint looked guilty, and Tori sighed. “It wasn't your fault either Hawkeye.” She said, irritated. She didn't need them blaming themselves.

Natasha looked around. “Have you seen May? I thought she'd be here.”

Tori shrugged. “I don't think she could face it.” She lied smoothly. “You know she's not one for crowds.”

“Still.” Natasha looked so sad. “I thought she might come. For him.” She couldn't quite bring herself to say his name. Clint's hand brushed hers, but she pulled away.

“It was just too much Nat.” He murmured. “You know how much he meant to her.”

She sighed. “I know. I just... wish we could do something. It's May. We owe her.”

Izzy smiled. “Maybe you can. Just not today.”

Clint looked to the headstone in the middle distance. The crowd was starting to disperse. “I'll see you guys at the wake.” He muttered, walking towards the grave.

Natasha quietly followed.

“It'll be okay Izzy.” Victoria murmured, putting a hand on her shoulder. “You know it will.”

“I know.” She sighed, looking at the grass. “I just wonder if it should be.”

It was dark when Melinda finally managed to get up. Her legs almost gave out from under her, but she managed to stumble to the closet and change her clothes. After taking a moment to ingest a protein bar, she pulled on her boots and went out the door, keeping her walls up, as usual.

It was a fresh evening, not cold, but not too warm either. The moon was half full, most of the stars blotted out by the streetlights. She walked onwards, not noticing the pain in her legs. She didn't stop when she reached the graveyard, she didn't stop as she scaled the fence, nor as she walked through the row upon row of graves she didn't recognise.

She only stopped when she came to the one she was looking for.

Phillip Coulson. It had, carved into the cold granite. Just the sight made her stomach turn. Phil wasn't granite. She was granite. She was unchangeable and grey. He was... bright, hopeful, idealistic. A hero.

A martyr.

She had known that all along, but Melinda had stupidly let herself think that it would be okay. Because he wasn't just Phil, he was her too. He had all of them, all of their skills, all of their knowledge. He couldn't just *die.*

“I'm sorry.” She whispered, kneeling before the headstone. “Phil, I- this is all my fault.” Tears burned her eyes and she forced them back. There was no point in crying. There was no point in apologising. Phil was dead. He couldn't hear her.

Melinda swallowed. “I'll find them.” She said clearly. “I'll fix this, for you, but after that...” She wasn't sure. She just wanted it all to stop. Tori and Izzy and Phil, and *everyone.* Why couldn't they just leave her? It was better that way. She wasn't worth their caring about her.

She could feel Tori and Izzy trying to get in, and pushed back. They must noticed she wasn't at her apartment. They were worried, that much she could feel. It didn't matter. They knew she wouldn't end it. She hadn't after Bahrain, after her divorce, after they lost two members of their already undersized cluster. Why would she do it now?

'Please'

The word came over their connection, even breaking through her

barriers. Phil?

'Please, don't.'

Melinda looked around. Was she going insane? Her head hurt, more than anything she'd ever felt before. What was happening? “Tori! Izzy!”

They appeared, both clutching their heads. “What the hell is going on?!” Izzy grunted, holding in a scream.

“I don't know!”

'Please let me die!'

“Phil?!”

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand some more info because this is kind of confusing :D if the vague is driving you crazy, this might help. (All this is taken from the sense8 wiki)

When a cluster's link has been activated, three main abilities begin to manifest in its sensates. These are visiting, sharing, and their psychic link.

Psychic Link
Sensates within a cluster are mentally and emotionally connected. It starts out as sensory input, where one sensate hears or tastes (or uses any of the other five senses) something another sensate is hearing or tasting. Gradually, their link strengthens to the point where they feel each other's thoughts and emotions

Visiting happens when sensates mentally communicate with each other. Sensates are seemingly mentally transported to each others' locations.
Visiting is done instinctively with the other members of one's cluster, but can also be done with other sensates outside of the cluster. This is only after firsthand, eye-to-eye contact has been made.

Sharing is when a sensate accesses the knowledge, language and skills of another sensate. Sharing is only done inside the cluster. In the case of skills, sharing allows a sensate to physically control a fellow sensate as they watch.

Chapter 3: Resurrection

Chapter Summary

Phil comes back.

It was hours of agony before any of them could move, think straight, do anything. Melinda had managed to stagger to a cab to get home rather than collapsing on Phil's fresh grave, but only succeeded in collapsing onto her living room floor instead. It was agony.

None of them were sure how long it had been when they eventually came to. Their connection wasn't even clear. Melinda pushed herself upright, stumbling to the kitchen for some water. She coughed and felt blood in her mouth. Great. “Guys?”

Izzy wiped her nose. “What the hell happened?”

“Hell if I know.” Tori grunted, “If I missed work because of this it is not going to be easy to explain.”

Melinda winced, trying to will away the remaining headache. It was like the hangover from hell. “Is it just me, or are we...”

“Fuzzy?” Izzy asked, “Yeah, feels like that.”

Tori swallowed two aspirin. “Even Peggy never mentioned anything like this. Or Garrett.”

Melinda's conversation was cut short by a knock at her door. All three looked up. “Who's that?”

“Damned if I know.” Melinda muttered, peering through the peephole. She froze.

“Agent May.” Director Fury said, before she opened the door, “We need to talk.”

Melinda swallowed the lump in her throat. “He's alive.”

“Yes.” Nick said calmly, watching her reaction. “I know it's a lot to take in.”

She laughed bitterly. “I- *we* have been in agony for *hours* Nick. And

now... he's alive."

"Yes."

She sighed, burying her face in her hands. "Why can't I sense him?" She was a mess of days old clothes, covered in dirt, but she didn't care.

Nick leaned back in his chair. Sun streamed through the window onto the table between them. "He's drugged right now, and we're gonna keep it that way for another day or so at least." He steepled his fingers. "Which is why I'm here. He can't know what really happened here."

May rolled her eyes. "And what did happen here?"

Nick didn't quite meet her eyes. "To bring him back, we had to use an experimental procedure. We've been developing it, but so far all we know is that once a patient is aware of what happened to them, their mental state starts to decline."

She bowed her head. "So you told someone with a mental connection with him."

Nick raised an eyebrow. "The way he tells it you've been blocking him out for years. Everyone, actually. Now you just have a reason to."

Melinda glared poisonously. She didn't like being used, even if it was for a good cause. The only cause she had left. "What do you need?"

"He'll come to you in about a week." Nick said. "He's got permission to form his dream team, plane with a bar, the whole works. He's gonna want you on it." She couldn't argue with that. "In the next few days you need to give me a list of agents you want on the team. I'll make him feel like it was his idea, and you'll be all set."

May swallowed. "What about Victoria and Isabelle?" Just saying their names like that felt wrong. She didn't want to drag them into this. It was only her who was broken, only her that needed to block Phil out. They didn't need it. "What are you going to tell them?"

"Same thing everyone's going to hear." He said steadily. "Coulson was dead for a few minutes before resuscitation. His death was a play to get the Avengers to work. He's been on rehab in Tahiti ever since, on some powerful pain medication."

The whole thing put a sour taste in her mouth. “You really think they'll believe that?”

Nick shrugged. “Sure. Memories are being implanted in his mind. They don't need to believe the story if they can see it.”

Melinda swallowed the sour taste, the lump in her throat, the bile at this very idea. “I don't like this.” She said. “I want you to understand that.”

“But?”

She sighed. “But he's alive. And I'm going to keep it that way.”

Fitz handed Jemma a glass of water and some pills downing his own. “I don't know what's bloody going on.” He groaned. “But I don't like it.”

“You and me both.” Jemma muttered, “I get enough of people laughing at us for spending time together without our headaches synching up.”

Fitz paused. “Uh, Jemma... you know how sometimes- ladies- when it's... you know, that time, of the month,” He was turning red, “They- well, they can...” He trailed off, staring at the floor.

Jemma scoffed, *“Honestly* Fitz, you think you've picked up on my *PMS?!* I don't even get headaches, and besides, I'm not due for another two weeks!”

“Okay,” Fitz cried, turning away, “I did not need to know that Jemma.”

She rolled her eyes, going back to her microscope. The lab had that artificial chill to it that couldn't quite permeate her lab coat. “Oh please, it's totally natural! The body sheds the lining of the uterus, menstrual blood flows from the uterus through the opening in the cervix and passes out of the body through the-”

“Okay!” Fitz interrupted, “I get it, just stop!”

A snigger came from behind them. “Nerds.”

“What?” Both of them whipped around at the voice. “Who's there?”

The lab was empty. Fitz looked to Jemma. “Y-you definitely heard

that, right? And you promise you can't throw your voice?"

Jemma shook her head, walking closer to where the voice came from. "I swear there was someone here, I-I definitely heard it."

Fitz rubbed his eyes. "Maybe we need to take a break. We're working too hard."

Jemma turned, surprised. "How could you say that? Our work is fascinating!"

"I know it's fascinating Jemma, but we're in the lab all the time! I'm just saying maybe we should take a day off every now and then, get some air or something."

Jemma sighed. "I suppose you're right. It can't hurt to leave the lab every once in a while."

Victoria Hand watched from the video feeds. She raised an eyebrow. What were the odds of two members of the same cluster already knowing each other? "I think I've got them." She muttered.

Melinda appeared beside her, looking at the feed. "Maybe." She said. "Hard to tell without testing it."

"Well you know we can't go around staring deeply into every agent's eyes. If any of them even are agents."

"I know." Melinda looked away. "Tori- I'm sorry this happened."

"It wasn't your fault." She said steadily. "We don't blame each other, you know that."

"How's your nose?"

She rolled her eyes. "From that little tap? I've gotten worse from cadets. Sci-tech cadets."

Melinda knew that in any other circumstance she might have smiled. Instead she just said, "Thanks for the help." And went to leave.

"Melinda," Tori's voice stopped her. "Has the connection been feeling strange to you? Over the last day?"

She paused. "A little." May admitted. "It feels... fuzzy. Maybe that's just what happens when we get this small."

“I miss him too you know.”

May managed to make a trip to the labs later that day. She could see the two young scientists bickering a mile away. If they weren't in the same cluster she would be very surprised. Then again, if they were they had played some odds knowing each other before their second birth. She hadn't heard of such a thing before.

The girl, Simmons, caught her eye through the glass and smiled politely.

The shock through her system wasn't one Melinda had felt for a long time. She turned on her heel and walked away.

It was definitely them. She pulled her phone out to call Fury. She knew who she needed for Phil's little dream team.

Skye groaned, sitting up. It was hard to steal aspirin when she could hardly walk in a straight line. What the hell was going on? The sandwich hadn't been that bad, but it was enough that she was hallucinating British scientists?

She pulled her laptop over, checking the news. More on the battle of New York. She glared at the screen. SHIELD. She hated SHIELD. Hiding the truth from those who needed it most. Families broken up because they thought they knew best. What gave them the right?

Skye started the recording on her laptop, clearing her throat. “The secret is out.” She said, letting herself speak freely. She could edit it later.

Skye listened to the rain on the roof of her van. She didn't know what was going to happen to her by picking a fight with SHIELD like this. She didn't really care. It wasn't like they could hurt her any more than they already had. Any more and any of the homes she'd been to had.

She wasn't feeling sorry for herself. She was just tired of relying on other people. She didn't need them, but so many kids like her did need answers. So many were lost and alone because of SHIELD's secrets.

A sound outside her ran made her look up, and Skye looked to the window. Curly hair, blue eyes. She stared. The same hallucination twice? That couldn't be right. She waved.

He turned. He looked confused. Scared. Skye went for her side door. “Hello?” She called, the rain pounding on her head in the warm spring air. “Who are you?”

But when she made it to the front of the van, no one was there.

Part of her was dreading that feeling of Phil coming back. Having to distance herself from him when he had *died,* and all she wanted was to see him again, feel him again, touch him again.

But she couldn't. For both their sakes.

May was asleep when she felt that flickering feeling across their minds. Feeling sick, she tried to force it back. She rubbed her eyes, feeling a headache coming on, and decided to start her tai chi. She wasn't sure she could do this.

“Melinda.”

Just that one word was enough to bring her walls crashing down. “Phil.” Before she knew what she was doing, May was hugging him tighter than she'd hugged anyone in her life, both of them collapsed to the floor of her apartment in the dark.

“Ssshhh, it's okay.” He soothed, stroking her hair, and it was only then that May noticed she was trembling. She knew that Fury wouldn't lie to her about this, but part of her hadn't accepted that he was alive until that moment.

She took a gasping breath. “We thought we lost you.”

“You did.” He murmured, holding her tightly. “But I'm back now. I'm back.” Phil squeezed her tighter, “God Mel I'm so sorry, I was so scared...”

She squeezed her eyes shut to keep from crying. “Don't do that ever again.”

“I won't.” He promised. “I'm sorry, I- I should have been paying more attention.”

She bit back a sob. “I'm the one who decided to birth a cluster in the middle of the battle of New York.”

“You didn't know it was going to happen. None of us did.” All she could feel from him was forgiveness and love. It would be so easy to

just give in to it. Give in to him. “It was too late by the time we realised.”

Melinda shivered. “I missed you so much.”

“It was less than a week.” He murmured, then paused. “Though I guess that's a long time after sharing a mind for almost thirty years. I-I tried to get through to you guys from Tahiti, but I think the meds were too strong.”

“It's okay.” She whispered. “You're here now. We're all together.”

Two more pairs of arms joined their hug, and for once May didn't pull herself out of it. “We're going to be okay.”

Chapter 4: Pilot

Chapter Summary

> The team comes together, and they find a Rising Tide hacker hiding in her van.

Melinda looked up at the Bus, trying to hide how impressed she was. It was nice. Really nice. She could pull off some great manoeuvres with those engines. She knew that Phil was trying to sneak up on her and rolled her eyes. “Pretty nice, right?” He said.

“It's fine.” May said, walking towards the ramp. She didn't like pushing him out. But she needed to.

Coulson sighed, watching her go. He knew it wouldn't be easy getting her to open up. It had been years. But maybe this plane and these kids could be the answer.

May watched the two bicker as she walked up the ramp. Christ, these kids were *green.* They might have been eight years old for their behaviour, demeanour, their smiles. Her kids.

No. They weren't her kids. They were just kids.

She swallowed, walking into the lab with enough noise to alert them. Both instantly quietened, looking at her for instruction. This was going to be hard.

Simmons spoke first. “Oh!” She said, bright as the sun, “You must be Agent May! It's lovely to meet you, I'm Jemma Simmons.” She shook her hand. May had trouble meeting her eyes. The eyes that she knew she would recognise.

May shook her hand, quickly letting go. “I understand you two haven't been cleared for combat.”

Jemma froze, shooting Fitz a look. “Well, no, but I'm sure we'll manage.” She tried not to sound annoyed.

Fitz cleared his throat, “Yeah, and we'll be plenty useful, we've actually been developing this new weapon for in the field, if you'd like to test it,”

“We'd very much appreciate any feedback.” Jemma completed.

Melinda said nothing, instead opting to quirk an eyebrow. She then turned and left. Those two were finishing each others sentences? Was that because of their connection, or just because they were already that close? She'd heard other agents talk about them, the youngest graduates ever from sci-tech. Fitzsimmons. Like they were one person.

This wasn't going to be easy.

Skye pocketed the ID she had swiped off 'Mike'. This was interesting. Superpowered guy, but not interested in being noticed? What was he hiding? Not that it mattered. He was going to be taken in by SHIELD soon enough.

But not before she was, and maybe she could protect him from them.

Skye booted up let laptop, leaving her van door unlocked so that they wouldn't break it when they busted her. She caught a brief feeling of... excitement? She shouldn't feel excited. She wasn't. She was mad, frustrated, but on the brink of maybe being able to get some answers.

And angry. Really angry at SHIELD, as usual.

Skye shook herself and opened her usual programs. This wasn't the time for this. She had more important things to do.

“How will you come at us? From the air? From the ground? How will you silence us this time?”

Coulson approached the nondescript van, catching May's eye and the black bag in her hand. He hoped this hacker would come quietly. It was hard enough to convince May to come back into the field. He was pretty sure half the reason she agreed was because she was squirrelly about his near death experience.

In the old days he would be able to know how she was feeling without guessing. No matter the distance, no matter what. He would just *know,* and he would be able to help, to understand. That was what their cluster was. What *every* cluster was. Understanding. Connection.

She shot him a look, and he nodded, pulling the door open, interrupting the girl mid-sentence. “Hey,” She said, trying for casual and failing pretty appallingly, “What up?”

Coulson caught May's eye on the drive back to the Bus. They couldn't

talk with the girl listening in, but at the same time they needed to talk. Now. He just hoped she would let him in.

“Did you feel it?” He asked across their connection, unable to be heard by anyone but their own cluster. He knew that Melinda did feel the snap of connection with the girl.

“Yes.” May replied tersely. “This just got a lot more complicated.”

“Is she one of yours?”

Even through May's barriers, Coulson felt the contempt for the term. “I didn't mean- it's just for convenience May. Is she in Fitzsimmons' cluster?”

She sighed. “Yes. The computer I saw when they- it was hers.”

He grimaced. “Great.”

“I know.”

“I mean, the odds of them being SHIELD agents are slim to none, I get that, but a rising tide hacker?” He groaned. “What are we gonna do?”

Melinda rolled her eyes. “Interrogate her.”

“Then what?”

She shrugged. “We'll see. She doesn't know us, and if we play it right she could be long gone before she figures out who Fitzsimmons are.”

He looked at her, driving their SUV. “You really think that's a good idea?”

“Maybe.”

The bag was very intentionally left on as they led the girl to the interrogation room, ignoring Fitzsimmons' stares. Thankfully they didn't say anything. At least they had that much common sense.

May left Coulson to his questioning and went to the cockpit. She needed to breathe. Clear her head of all of these people trying to get in. She couldn't let them in.

Any of them.

Skye scowled at the man before her. He looked like he was trying to intimidate her. He didn't know that he couldn't take anything from her that SHIELD hadn't already stolen. “You're making a big mistake.” She said, brushing her hair out of her face.

Coulson cocked his head. “Somehow I don't think so.” He said. “What's your name?” He asked softly.

She shifted. “Skye.” She said haltingly.

He nodded. “Thank you. There's one other name we need, then you can go on your way. A certain hero.”

Skye swallowed, suddenly wondering if she wasn't in over her head. “What makes you think I know that?”

Coulson smiled, sitting down. “Well, you made a little mistake. The phone you filmed the hooded hero on had the same signature as some of the rising tide's posts. Our scientists traced it as soon as they noticed.” He tested the waters, seeing how she would react.

Skye hid her surprise. SHIELD scientists. Like those two she'd seen the week before in the lab that couldn't exist. She smirked. “Oh yeah. Was that a mistake, or am I now in your secret headquarters? And we both know you can't beat the encryption on my stuff so sorry, you've got nothing!”

Coulson wasn't fazed. “We've got information. That you were on the scene right before the building went up. That you've been tracking this guy.” He gestured to the pictures. “We just want to help him. He could very well be in danger.”

“From who?” Skye asked, failing to keep her temper. “Tell me, who could do more damage to someone's life than SHIELD? All you do is cover things up, like New Mexico, project pegasus, of course you'd cover up centipede!”

He raised an eyebrow. “Centipede?”

May watched Fitz and Simmons work the scene, secretly impressed. They'd never been in the field before, yet both of them were showing a lot of promise. Their professionalism needed work, but Simmons had immediately started working on the closest cadaver, and Fitz's drones were... useful to say the least.

Those two would be an asset to any cluster.

“So why not tell them?” Izzy appeared beside her, but Melinda made no reaction. “You could help. We all could.”

“They need to figure it out for themselves.”

Izzy rolled her eyes. “Oh yeah, I remember how Peggy let us roam around and 'figure it out' ourselves for *ages* before she told us what the hell was going on.” She said sarcastically.

“Leave it alone.”

“Fine.” Izzy muttered, “But I won't for long. Neither will the others, you know they won't. These kids need you Melinda. You can't shut them out forever.”

May bit back a retort, opting instead to talk to the kids. “Ready to go?”

Fitz looked up, “Yeah, almost.” He said, “Just gotta put these away.”

“Good, let's make a move.”

Skye watched with veiled horror as Mike tore apart the factory he used to work at. “This isn't him.” She said, “This isn't the guy I met, he just-” She sighed, “He just needs a break.”

“Then give him one.” Coulson said gently. “We can help. What have you got?”

Hesitantly, Skye drew the ID out of her pocket.

“Thank you.” Coulson said, taking it. He opened the comm link to the SUV. “Guys, can get back here as soon as possible?”

“Faster than that.” May's voice replied, sounding somewhat annoyed at the scientific jabbering going on in her back seat.

Coulson grinned.

Skye cocked her head. “Your girlfriend?” She asked.

He raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

Skye watched as the woman from earlier entered the conference room. She looked vaguely familiar. Like she'd seen her in a dream. Skye shook it off. Probably nothing. She must have seen her face when she was hacking through SHIELD's personnel files.

The two behind her, however, she could not mistake anywhere.

Skye balked, noting that they did too. “Who the hell are you?!” She asked, gaping.

Fitz looked around, noting that Coulson and May didn't even seem to notice their conversation. “What do you mean who the hell are we, who the hell are you?!”

Skye scowled, getting ahold of herself somewhat. “I'm Skye, your SHIELD goons just kidnapped me.”

Jemma rolled her eyes, “Oh honestly, that's a little dramatic.”

“They put a bag over my head! You know what, never mind, what's going on?!” Skye asked, “Why can't they hear us?”

Jemma and Fitz looked around, “I think we must have some kind of psychic connection.” Jemma speculated.

“Yeah, triggered that day in the lab,” Fitz completed, “When you were with Doctor Newling.”

Jemma stared. “You saw that too? I thought I was going mad.”

“Guys?” Coulson's voice interrupted. “You with us?”

Jemma shook herself, “Yes, of course, sorry sir.”

He nodded. “Skye, this Agents Fitz and Simmons, you've already met Agent May.” May gave her a curt nod which Skye was tempted to mock.

“Fitz what do we have from the security footage before the blast?” Coulson asked, walking around the table.

Fitz tapped at the holotable, bringing up the picture from the fried cameras. “What are we seeing?” May asked.

Fitz pointed. “Well, the man is angry. At the other man.”

Coulson bit back a smile seeing how May glared. Fitz seemed to sense

that he hadn't given the answer they were after. “The data's really corrupt, this is all we could get from it. We can't synch the time code.”

“What if you had the audio?” Skye asked, drawing their stares. She shifted awkwardly. “I had my van monitoring the place before it went up, I couldn't get the background noise out, but you guys could do that, right?” She tried not to make it sound like she already knew. She did though, somehow.

The two looked at each other. “Yeah, that'd be great.” Fitz said, trying to make sure he said it out loud.

Coulson watched them. “Your van's here. But you're right, we couldn't beat the encryption.”

Skye smiled, proud that they couldn't get in. “It's tied to the GPS,” She explained, “I just need to get my van back to that alley and I can send the audio file across.”

“Agent May can escort you.” Coulson said, ignoring the annoyance he could feel May projecting.

Skye shot a look at Agent May. Now she wasn't sure if she'd seen her in the personnel files, or if it wasn't something else after all.

Skye tapped at her laptop, listening for May's movements. *Damn* that woman was quiet. “That should do it!” She said, surreptitiously slipping her micro-SD card into her bra. Hopefully no one would notice it. Hopefully she could keep it from Fitz and Simmons, though that might be harder than she thought.

“Let's head back.” May said briskly. She reached for the van door when a figure jumped down behind her. She yelped, trying to find purchase on something before she was thrown into a wall.

Skye yelped. That hurt.

Wait, what? “Mike, what are you doing?”

“Saving you.” Mike said, climbing into the van, “And now you're going to save us.”

Great.

Skye had to admit that she was warming to SHIELD more and more as

she saw how much Mike was losing it. He needed help, and despite his unsettling smile, she thought that Coulson actually wanted to help him.

Though she was starting to regret getting involved when it came to the injuries, the weird psychic connection with a couple of scientists that happened to be projecting nothing but anxiety right now, and the life threatening danger.

Still, it wasn't as bad as when some guy started *shooting* at her and Mike, resulting in Mike falling down into the dais. He looked okay though. Good for him. Now she was stuck with the guy with the gun, and it was pointed right at her.

Before Skye could even move, May ran up behind the guy, carrying a large gun. She immediately dropped it, kicking the back of his knee to throw him off balance, wrenching the gun from his grip, and knocking him out, faster than Skye could follow.

She met Skye's eyes, and there was something there. Not quite a connection like she'd had with Fitzsimmons, but... something odd. May picked up her rifle. “Move over.” She instructed, setting it up.

Skye did so, catching her breath. “Uuh, thanks.” She said softly.

“Don't mention it.”

“A-are you going to kill him?” Skye wasn't sure if she could watch that. She didn't think she could let May do it.

May tapped at her comm and smiled ever so slightly. “Apparently not.”

Skye walked back to the car feeling better than she had in a long time. “It's a brave new world! And a really old car.”

Coulson smiled that smile that made her think he knew more than he was letting on. “Lola can keep up.” He got in, Skye sitting in the passenger seat. “What about you? Did you think about the offer?”

Yes. “Joining your band of merry agents? I'm not really a team player.”

He shrugged. “We're not really a team. Not yet. But we can do some good, and that does seem like your style. You'd be a great help, and

you'd get to be front row for some of the craziest stuff on earth."

Oh you have no idea. Skye thought.

Chapter 5: 084

May entered the conference room silently, watching her partner. His back was turned to her, looking at the wall screen. “Go on. Say it.” He muttered.

She grimaced. “None of them have any combat experience.” She said, uneasy. “Their cluster doesn't have any way of protecting themselves.”

“Not yet.” He said, turning. “We don't know how many others there are for them. This is kind of a unique situation as far as I know. The connection's never been this stilted.”

Melinda looked away.

“It's not your fault.” Coulson said gently. “Hey, maybe you should be blaming me for getting stabbed.”

She swallowed. “Don't talk like that.” She said stiffly.

He held up his hands. “You're right. Too soon, I'm sorry.” He couldn't feel Melinda's thoughts on his death, but he could feel Tori and Izzy's. Their heartbreak. His funeral. The memory of May punching Tori in the face before the funeral. Strange to think that he was coping with his death better than they were.

May sighed and leaned against the table beside him. “There's two of us, and three kids not cleared for combat.” She said.

He frowned. “Are you saying you want Skye off the plane?”

She shook her head with a sigh. “I just don't like this Phil. It's safer for her here, but not safe enough.”

“I know.” Coulson murmured, “But it'll never be safe enough. We can only do our best.”

“You're taking them all out on a mission.”

“Because it's necessary.” He said, “And I trust that between the two of us we can keep them safe. Besides, it's not a combat op.”

May rolled her eyes. “Where have I heard *that* before?”

“So you're just going to scan my brain?!”

“It's nothing personal, we'd just like to check!”

“What, if I'm some crazy psychic that's been stalking you?”

Jemma rolled her eyes. “Oh don't be so dramatic.”

“Yeah, we just wanna check for any abnormalities. We've already got our brain scans on file.”

“Oh, sorry, so you're checking whether my *brain is mutated*. Way better, thanks.”

May cleared her throat from the lab door and the three looked up guiltily. Oh God, they thought they were being covert. It was almost cute. “Buckle up.” She said, “We're going to Peru.”

Jemma perked up immediately. “Peru! Is this for the 084? Oh, this is going to be fascinating!” May had already left.

Fitz rolled his eyes at the enthusiasm she was projecting, catching Skye's eye and grinning. “There are *so* many ways we could get killed in Peru Jemma. Even without the 084.”

Skye frowned. “Wait, what's an 084?”

“Uuh, object of unknown origin.” Fitz replied, stacking up his tools.

Jemma was placing all her beakers in a rack. “Yes, can be alien, or just local, but unclear on where it came from! It'll be our job to go in, identify it, and bring it back, if possible.”

“Great.” Skye muttered. “Raincheck on the brain scan then.”

Jemma beamed. “Yes, maybe another time.”

Skye rolled her eyes, climbing up the stairs.

She saw Coulson strapping himself in at the common area table and sat near him. He cocked his head as she sat down. Something seemed off. “What's up?”

Skye looked up, surprised. How could *he* tell she was feeling off, when the people she was psychically linked with couldn't? “Nothing,” She sighed, “I just don't know if I fit in here. I'm a bit of an outsider.”

Coulson shrugged. “Well yeah.” He said, “But that isn't always a bad thing. Fitzsimmons were the youngest cadets to ever graduate from the academy. May's been in administration for years, but now she's back in the field.”

“Why?” Skye frowned. Also holy shit, she was *out of practice?*

“I asked her to.”

She eyed him. “You sure she's not your girlfriend?”

He smiled. “I dare you to say that in front of her.”

Skye laughed nervously. “Pass, thanks. I've seen what she can do.”

So it was fair to say that the mission hadn't gone exactly as planned, Coulson thought as he used Izzy's knot tying skills to get himself off the table. Melinda was unconscious, he could sense that at least. Not good. She was definitely going to kick his ass over this once they got out of it.

Fitz sighed. “This is my fault.” He grumbled. “I should have learned kung-fu.”

Skye snorted, tugging at her arms, but they were tied too tightly. Which was kind of saying something.

“I shouldn't have pushed you into coming into the field in the first place.” Jemma said. “You weren't ready.”

Skye rolled her eyes. “This wouldn't have happened if Agent May wasn't on the stick. She's have kicked some ass with her ninja stuff.”

Fitz frowned. “May? No, she transferred from administration.”

Skye shrugged. “Well yeah, but you don't have to stay in the same department your whole life, right? I saw her *destroy* a guy at union station.” Fitzsimmons still looked unconvinced, and she hesitated. “And... there's something else. I think people call her the Cavalry.”

A hand suddenly seized her wrist in an iron grip and Skye bit back a scream.

It seemed like May was awake, her bonds leaving her hands within reach of Skye. “How the hell do you know that?”

Skye stared, willing her heart to stop pounding. “I-I saw your personnel file, that's all.”

May released her, seeming satisfied with her answer. “Don't ever call me that.” She growled, leading all three of them to shrink away from her glare.

Jemma swallowed. “So, how do we get out of here?”

May looked at the three of them. Kids. She knew that this would happen. She didn't think it would be this soon. “We can't go through the doors.” She grunted. “They're bolted, tied to the pressurisation lines.” She could feel Phil. He was alive, but in pain. Picking his way out of his binds. She nodded to Fitzsimmons. “You two geniuses have nothing?”

Some of her incredulity must have come through, because Fitz looked almost offended. “Well it's hard to concentrate in these situations!”

“Fitz it's okay!” Skye cried, seizing their connection. “Just calm down, take a breath.” Skye wasn't entirely sure what she was doing. It was like their connection was bent out of shape with worry, and she was bending it back again. “You don't have to come up with the whole solution, just part of it.”

May couldn't help but admire Skye's initiative. She opened her connection with Coulson, visiting to crouch beside him. “You okay?”

He smiled at her. “Great. You?”

She rolled her eyes. “The kids are working on a fix. Just buy us some time.”

“Can do.”

“And you owe me a drink for getting us into this.”

“I know, I know.”

May shook herself, going back to the kids.

“Well that's clearly the worst idea we've had yet.”

“But it could work!”

“If it could work then it's better than anything else so far.” May cut in. “You got any better ideas?” When there was only silence, she nodded.

“Good. What's first?”

Fitz grimaced. “We can't get upstairs without going in the lab.”

“But the only way to release the lab doors is from upstairs.”

Skye rolled her eyes. “Well the first thing is that we're tied to the cargo door, so unless you guys can-” She broke off with a yelp when she heard a painful crunch.

“What the hell was that?”

Skye felt the pain throbbing in her arm and glanced at May. “Her wrist.” She said, wincing in pain.

Skye felt that sick feeling in her stomach grow as she typed the message to Miles. It felt like she was lying to them. Technically she was. None of them knew the real reason that she was there, and something about that made her nervous. They'd find out, and then she would be alone. Again.

Except she wouldn't, would she? This connection, or whatever it was she had with Fitz and Simmons wouldn't go away. Then again, they might decide they didn't want her in it any more.

May watched Skye walk to the ramp, pocketing her phone. Coulson caught her eye. “She could end up as more than a consultant.” He noted. “She's got potential.”

She nodded, feeling Tori and Izzy appear behind them. “Something's up with her.”

Tori moved to stand beside her. “She hiding something?”

Melinda nodded. “She knew what they call me in the academy stories.” She didn't need to say it. They all knew.

Izzy raised an eyebrow. “So? She could have heard that from the other two.”

“No. They didn't know.” Coulson said.

“They do now.” May grimaced. “She said she saw it on my personnel file.”

All three of them frowned. “But- it's not on your personnel file.”

“I know.”

Coulson frowned. “It's not on *any* file. It's a story. Why would she lie if she just heard it from another agent?”

Tori narrowed her eyes, examining Skye. “Maybe she didn't. Or maybe she knows a lot more than she's letting on.”

Coulson looked to May. “You think she suspects?”

She shrugged. “Not sure. But we need to keep an eye on her.”

They all nodded. Phil bit his tongue, trying to think of a good was to suggest it.

“Just spit it out Phil.”

He jumped, surprised, then grinned. “Well, if Skye's going to stay on the team, be an agent, she'll need a supervising officer. Someone who'll be tough on her, who's dedicated, good.”

Melinda nodded, “So you'll take her on.” She said, deliberately misinterpreting his words.

Izzy laughed. “Yeah, cos when I think 'tough', I think *Phil.”*

Coulson had the gall to look offended, and the others grinned. “No. She trusts me, sure, but she looks up to you. Something about being an 'awesome ninja.'”

May looked hesitant, and Izzy and Tori took it as their cue to leave.

Coulson shifted a little closer. “What's up?”

Her jaw worked for a few moments before she replied. “There's something else. You felt me dislocate my wrist to get out of the ties?”

“Yeah. Hurt like a bitch. I thought we'd agreed to give warnings when you're gonna do that.”

May rolled her eyes, but continued. “Well, I could be wrong, but I think that Skye felt it too. She reacted at the same time.”

“It could have been the sound.”

“Yes.” She admitted. “But it seemed a bit much to be just that.”

He stared. “You think she's connected with you? Like, more than we are to Peggy?”

“I don't know Phil. Maybe.” She shifted. “She's good for her cluster. She calmed Fitz down without even knowing what she was doing.”

“But?”

“But I don't trust her.”

He shrugged. “You don't have to trust her Melinda. You just need to train her. And keep an eye on her. You said yourself that their cluster doesn't know how to protect themselves. Training Skye could help with that. You'd be training all of them.”

She scowled. “I don't like this.”

“I know.” He said. “But we have to make do.”

“We blew up a plane!” Fitz exclaimed, and the two separated, watching the kids hurry down the ramp with a cooler.

“They're happy.” May noted.

Coulson smiled. “It's new to them. All of it. Remember being young?”

“I'm still young, Phil.”

“Of course you are.”

“Guys come on, you're gonna miss it!” Fitz called, passing Jemma a beer.

May let herself sit beside Simmons, taking the offered drink and undoing her jacket. She listened to them babble and watched the rocket fuel up.

This was going to be even harder than she'd expected.

Skye lingered on the ramp, enjoying the warm spring air. She could feel the happiness and contentment radiating from Fitz and Simmons. It was nice. She liked being a part of something. Even if that something could come crashing down. It wouldn't be the first time.

When the sun had just crept below the horizon, Skye pushed herself up, gathering the few beer bottles remaining. She turned and jumped,

dropping them, when she saw May sitting on the stairs by the lab, watching her.

Skye winced at the noise as the bottles rolled off the ramp. “Sorry.” She muttered, “You scared me.”

May shook her head. “You wanna be a field agent?” She asked abruptly.

Skye was taken aback. “I- don't really know what that is, to be honest.”

May rolled her eyes. “Coulson's a field agent. Fitzsimmons are sci-tech. I'm a specialist.”

“What's that?”

“An assassin.”

Skye froze. “Oh.” She tried not to look scared or impressed. “And a field agent...”

“Runs missions, fights. More of an all rounder.”

“Right.”

May raised an eyebrow when Skye didn't say anything else. “So do you want to be a field agent?” She asked impatiently.

“I-” The night chill had started to creep in, and Skye wrapped her arms around herself. “Yeah, I mean- sure.”

“You have to be dedicated.” May warned. “It's a lot of hard work. If you're not prepared to put in the effort I'd rather not waste my time.”

“No!” Skye blurted, “No, I'll do it.”

“Good.” May said. “Training starts tomorrow morning at five.”

Skye stared. “Five *A.M?!*”

“Is that a problem?”

Skye backtracked when she saw the steel in May's eyes. “Uh, nope, no problems here! See you bright and early at... five am.”

“Good.” May said, walking away.

Skye groaned. What had she gotten herself into?

Chapter 6: Girl in the Flower Dress

May would be lying if she said she wasn't worried when Skye switched off her comms in Quinn's villa. As she had said to Coulson, she didn't trust her, and Skye's cavalier attitude towards training hadn't really helped her look any better in May's eyes.

She had assumed that Skye would be too tired to train the next day, and had risen for her usual tai chi when she heard noise coming from the gym.

Quietly, she moved out onto the area overlooking the cargo hold.

Huh.

Skye had dragged herself out of bed a full half hour before their usual time to train. She looked tired, but she was keeping her arms up and had wrapped her hands before she set into the punching bag.

Melinda watched her for a minute. Skye was a rogue element. She followed her heart, resisted orders. But she was lonely. May was seeing that more and more clearly over the last week. Even living with her cluster, she was still lonely. Scared. In need of validation.

Melinda sighed internally. She didn't trust Skye. She didn't even like Skye. Both of them were hiding things from the other. There was no way they could be friends. There was no point in telling her that she had done well on the mission.

A soft sigh came from beside her. “You don't think she would like to know?”

May glanced at Peggy. “No.” She muttered. “If she did her best then she already knows. No need for me to say it.”

Peggy shook her head. “Always hiding behind business.”

Melinda narrowed her eyes. “It's my job to train her, not make her feel good about herself.”

“People have been known to do both you know.” Peggy reminded, but she could sense Melinda's resilience. “They'll find out eventually, whether you like it or not. Perhaps it would be better if they like you a little before they do.”

May said nothing, and Peggy vanished with a sigh. She walked down the stairs. “I thought you'd be too tired for training.”

Skye jumped. “Well I've lived with some pretty strict families.” She said, letting May inspect the wrappings on her hands, “I can follow a routine if I want to.”

May released her arm, satisfied. “Foster homes?”

Skye swallowed, turning back to the punching bag. “Yeah.” She said, refusing to look at May as she held the bag still. “Never really fit in. I tried to do what they wanted, a couple of times, but that didn't work either.”

Damnit. She didn't want to feel sorry for her. “SHIELD doesn't work like that.” May said. “We protect our own.”

Skye hit the bag slightly harder. “I'm not a SHIELD agent.”

“Not yet.” May said, hating herself for saying it, “But you're shaping up.”

Skye stopped, looking up. “Yeah?”

May rolled her eyes. “I don't say things I don't mean.” She muttered, crossing her arms defensively.

Skye grinned a little. “Okay, sorry, didn't mean to thaw out that heart you've got buried somewhere in there.” May glared and she backtracked. “Kidding!”

May watched Skye sit in the interrogation room with her boyfriend. She should have seen this coming. She *did* see this coming. She was angry though. Anger was okay, anger was the right reaction here. What she didn't expect was the hurt.

Melinda shook herself. Probably just Phil projecting.

She watched Fitzsimmons walk by, whispering to one another. Probably about Skye.

“I don't understand how she could do this! I thought we were friends, we have this connection!”

Jemma sighed. “She is our friend Fitz, I- just think that maybe he's more than that.”

“No- Jemma, I mean- *how* did she lie to us? Block us out? She was doing this the whole time, how could she hide it from us?” He ducked his head, paranoid at being overheard. They stopped outside Jemma's bunk.

“I don't know Fitz!” She snapped, immediately quieting. “This whole situation is confusing. We still don't know anything about this connection, why is occurred, why to us, how it works. Skye might just be ahead of us in figuring out how to use it.”

He shook his head, bracing himself against a wall. “So she figures out how to control this thing, and her first decision is to lie, and hide things from us?! What kind of person does that?”

Jemma groaned. “Fitz I think she was just scared! She didn't know about us, she- she already had her plan before we found out about this.”

Fitz kicked at the ground. “Yeah, and now she's blocking us out.” He muttered. “Doesn't that make you suspicious?”

“No.” Jemma said. “It makes me think that she's scared we're angry with her, and doesn't know what to say.”

“She could start with 'I'm sorry'.”

“Fitz.”

Coulson sighed, watching Skye from his office. He could hear Melinda approaching from a mile away. “Go ahead.” He muttered. “Say it.”

May paused. “I should have known.”

The surprised him. “What?”

She leaned against the doorframe. “I've been training her for weeks now Phil. I should have seen it.”

“Maybe.” He acknowledged. “But she's not the only one hiding something.” He grimaced. “We should have told her. Maybe then she'd have trusted us enough to tell us about this.”

Melinda bristled. “We don't need to *buy* her trust. I'm her S.O. She should have told me.”

He shrugged. “Why would she? You've been trying pretty hard to keep

your relationship totally professional. Hard for a kid like Skye to trust someone who does that." When her anger became apparent, Coulson held up his hands. "I'm not saying that what she did was right." He said, "I'm just saying, it's understandable that she didn't trust us."

Melinda scowled, but she knew that he was right. "So what do we do now?"

Coulson leaned back in his chair. "She's still hiding something."

"Yes."

"Something we don't know about."

Melinda nodded.

He paused. "But it's not a priority. What is a priority is Chan Ho Yin. We need to find him."

"I'll get Fitzsimmons on it."

"I'm sorry." Miles muttered. "I didn't know."

Skye couldn't help the rage coursing through her. "All our talks. Did you mean none of it? I gave *everything* for you and it turns out you were just lying to me the whole time!" She could feel Fitzsimmons' presence, pushing gently against her barriers. She pushed back. Hard.

"I could have funded us for *years!"* Miles defended, "Years, so you wouldn't have to join some corrupt institution to find what you're looking for, what's wrong with that?"

A pit opened in Skye's stomach, knowing that they were definitely being recorded. "I'll tell you, an innocent guy might *die!"* She shouted, "For *money."*

"You know I'd never intentionally hurt anyone." Miles didn't even look like the guy she used to know. "I'm just looking for answers. At least you know what you're looking for. I don't." Skye snorted internally. She knew what that meant. It meant that his life was *fine.* "For a long time I thought it was you. I guess I was wrong."

Jemma burst through her barrier, almost making Skye jump out of her chair. "Now that is just totally unfair!" She shouted at Miles, even knowing that he couldn't hear her. "It is not Skye's job to make your miserable life worth living, have you got that?!"

Skye blinked and saw that Miles was staring at her. “I- you're right, I'm sorry.” He muttered.

Skye frowned. Had Jemma just...

Jemma.

In a moment she was with her. Skye stared. “You- you're not mad at me?”

Jemma jumped, “Oh lord, Skye, I'm sorry for that outburst.” She said, “I don't know- I was just so angry.”

“For me though.” Skye bit her lip. “I- I'm sorry I didn't tell you guys.”

Jemma smiled and took her hand. “It's quite alright. I understand. None of us asked for this... whatever it is. Even with it, well, we're not really *friends.”*

Skye squeezed her hand. “Can we be?”

Jemma's smile widened. “I'd like that.”

“Cool.” Skye said shyly. “Oh, and by the way, you kind of... took over my body just then.”

“Wait, what?!”

Melinda had to admit, it was pretty cathartic to kick the hell out of the centipede guards. They were armed, she wasn't, but it didn't exactly matter. Coulson was giving her that tired look that she knew meant she was enjoying this too much, but she didn't care. He could tell her off later, she needed to vent a little.

It wasn't until someone hit the lockdown procedures that things got more complicated. May's head turned slightly hearing the different doors slam shut, locks activating. Her thoughts flickered to Tori and Izzy, but neither of them could be of much help getting them unlocked.

Phil typed at the computer that was in the lab, and both their sets of eyes widened in horror when they saw Chan.

Agent Kwan sank to the floor with a large scorched hole in his chest. “Chan.” Coulson said, “What have you done?”

He smiled maniacally. “I've set myself free.”

May fired a couple of shots at him, but they melted before they made contact.

Coulson dove for cover near her. “This isn't good.”

“We've locked in, what are we supposed to do?”

“You're better at computers than me.” He said quickly, “You try to get the doors open, I'll distract him.”

“Phil this is dangerous.”

“Then you'd better work fast.”

Phil immediately started trying to talk Chan down, and May stealthily crept towards the computer, out of sight. She reached it and swore internally. Shit. She had no idea how to unlock the doors with this system. The whole thing got mixed up when the lockdown was put into place, probably to prevent people like her from opening the doors.

“Need a hand?”

May's head whipped around at the voice. “Skye?!”

She looked around, taking in the situation. “You need the lockdown override, right? I can do that.”

May glanced at Chan, still talking to Coulson. “Tell me what to do.”

Skye grimaced, “It'll be faster if I just-” She seized control of May's hands, hacking the doors in moments.

Something in Melinda froze. This was wrong. No one could do that, certainly not Skye, and certainly not to her. How-

“Stop.” Tori's voice interrupted her thoughts. “Not isn't the time Melinda.”

She shook herself. Tori was right. Not when there was an insane pyrokinetic in the room targeting her partner.

“Chan!” She called, getting his attention enough that Phil emptied his holster. Unfortunately, Chan stopped all of the night night gun's cartridges before they made contact. When they could see again after

the flames had died down, Chan was gone.

Phil hurried to the table by her. “That was his last chance, you know that right?” May asked.

“Yeah. Time to minimise the damage.” Coulson said grimly.

Taking down Chan wasn't hard. Escaping from the exploding building wasn't hard.

Taking the looks that Coulson was giving her on the ride back, that was hard. “What's up with you?” He asked as they drove the short distance to the Bus. “Is it being back in the field so fast? I told you, we can get another specialist to help you if you want.”

She shook her head stiffly. “No.”

Phil sighed. “May I can't read your mind. Well, I can, but you won't let me.” Even that didn't get it's usual glare. “Melinda.”

Tori and Izzy appeared, and May's hands on the steering wheel tightened. “It's Skye.”

“Look, we can deal with her when we get back.”

Tori shook her head. “No. She unlocked the doors.”

Phil nodded. “I thought that was faster than you usually can. Fitzsimmons must have let her out to get remote access.”

“No.” May muttered. “They didn't.” She took a breath. “She- Phil she visited me. She knows. Maybe she always has.”

“Okay.” He said, processing. “That's okay, they were going to find out eventually.”

“Phil, she *shared,* with me.”

“What?!” Three voices cried out incredulously. “But-but- how?!”

“Do you think I know?!”

“But you can't share with anyone outside your cluster!”

“Thanks Izzy, I'd totally forgotten!”

“How did this happen?”

“I don't know! She just- took over!”

“Guys, calm down!” Phil cried, projecting calm strongly enough that they could all take a breath. “We'll talk to Skye. Maybe she's up to something, maybe she just doesn't know what she's meant to be able to do.”

Melinda swallowed and Izzy put a hand on her shoulder. “You okay?” She asked.

“No.” May said flatly. No one had shared with her since...

“It'll be okay.” Izzy said earnestly, blocking out the other two. “The kid didn't see anything. You know she didn't.”

“But she *could.”* Melinda said quietly, scared. “Izzy, it was so easy for her to get in. Like I- like she was never blocked out.”

“You'll manage it.” Izzy murmured. “Maybe letting her in isn't the worst thing. Just think about it.”

Skye watched Miles walk down the ramp and was surprised to find that she wasn't sad to see him go. The strongest emotion she could feel was relief. If that was hers at all. She walked quietly up to Coulson's office, wondering if she was going to face the same fate. Or worse.

She passed through the common area just in time to see May slip away. She was mad at her, and Skye knew that she deserved it.

Jemma and Fitz were noticeably silent, probably also not sure what was going to happen to her. She wondered if they would miss her when she was gone.

She moved slowly into Coulson's office, sitting down in the chair even though every instinct told her to run. Skye swallowed, her heart hammering in her chest. “I- never wanted anyone to-”

“Stop lying.” Coulson interrupted her, his voice far from the casual warmth it usually held. “All you've been doing since you got here is lying. I stood up for you, in front of the Director, and our team. Hell, we even started to believe in you, and all you've done in return is lie.”

The cold feeling of shame had a grip on her heart. Skye was okay getting kicked out. She didn't need Coulson reminding her what a

terrible person she was while he did it.

“We fought for you, risked our lives for you.” Skye looked down. “Why are you here?! You've been keeping something from us, and it's not just Miles, you have a secret Skye.”

Suddenly she felt angry. “*I* have a secret?!” Skye burst out, standing up, “You think acting like I'm the *only* person on this plane who's been keeping secrets will mean that I just *forget?!* We've been trying to work out what the hell we are ever since we got here, and this *whole time*, you knew! But it's all *my* fault? Just because I wanted answers?!”

“Answers to what?”

Skye scowled, and Coulson leaned against his desk. “Okay.” He said. “You tell me your answers, and I'll tell you mine, then we'll figure out what we're going to do. Okay?” He felt May appear behind him, watching silently. Knowing that Skye couldn't see her. The steel returned for a moment. “If you don't want to tell me anything then you know where the door is.”

She continued to glare, but after a moment pulled the micro card out of her bra and put it on his desk.

Coulson looked at it, not picking it up. “What is that?”

Skye gritted her teeth, forcing the tears back. “It's everything I have.”

“On us.”

“On *me.”* She ground out. “That's why I learned to hack systems, why I joined the rising tide. To find any information I could on my family.” Coulson booted up the drive, seeing the files flicker up on his office screen. May shifted to see better. Skye wiped her nose. “There's *nothing.”* She said, “No records, no *trace.* My whole life I've been looking, and all I got was one file. Redacted.”

Coulson looked at the final file, suddenly feeling guilty. “By SHIELD.”

Skye glared at the floor. “It doesn't matter what you do.” She said, “I'll never stop looking.”

Melinda sighed. They couldn't kick her out for this. They both knew it. Phil reached for the tissue box on his desk, offering it. “If you wanna stay,” He said, “I think we can help. But there are conditions.”

“Like what?”

He pulled out a box like the one he had given Miles. “You need to wear this for the conceivable future. Prove you're trustworthy.”

Skye looked at it. She swallowed. “What hand?”

Coulson raised an eyebrow. “Either.”

She nodded, taking a breath to calm down, then clicking the bracelet around her right wrist.

He didn't need to hear May's emotions to know that she was impressed with Skye's actions too. Phil stood. “I'm going to get you some water. Try to calm down.”

“You said you'd give me answers.” Skye said flatly. “Or is lying okay when it's you?”

Coulson chalked the attitude up to how upset she was, and tried not to snap. “I'm still going to explain.” He said. “I just want to make sure you don't have a panic attack before them. Fitz and Simmons wouldn't appreciate that.”

Skye stared. “You know about-”

He raised an eyebrow, indicating for her to breathe. Skye glared poisonously, but did as she was asked. When Coulson returned with water she did seem a lot calmer.

“Are they here?” He asked softly.

Skye frowned. “What, you can't tell?”

He shook his head. “Not without visiting. And I wouldn't want to do that without asking. Unless it was an emergency.”

Skye swallowed. “What's visiting?”

Oh boy. He sat down. “When others appear near you without actually being there. We call that visiting.”

Skye fiddled with the bracelet. “What *are* we?”

Coulson laced his fingers. Melinda was gone now. Probably hiding somewhere. He could tell that the incident with Skye had unnerved her. “We call ourselves sensate.”

“Great name.” Skye rolled her eyes. “What does it mean?”

“I think you've probably noticed.” He said. “Your minds are expanding, joining together. You're part of a cluster of other minds, and you can draw on each other's experience and skills, feel what they're feeling, see what they're seeing.”

“So... Me and Fitzsimmons, we're a cluster?”

“Yes.”

Skye hesitated. “Are you and May?”

“Yes. And two others.”

Skye frowned, absorbing the information. Coulson's eyes narrowed. “You really don't know anything about this, do you?”

Skye set her jaw. “I said I wasn't gonna lie.” She muttered. “I don't say things I don't mean.” Coulson held up his hands in a sign of peace, and she took a sip of water. “Why?”

“You're taking to it very well.” Coulson said. “You visited someone outside of your cluster, that usually takes a while to develop.”

Skye sighed. “Why didn't you just tell us?” She asked, “We're on the same plane.”

“I- we, decided that you should figure some of this out by yourselves.” He didn't want to place the blame for this on May. They'd all agreed to it too.

Skye swallowed another gulp of water. “How did this even happen?” Fitzsimmons appeared behind her. Fitz put a hand on her shoulder.

Coulson stood. “I'm getting a drink.” He declared abruptly, going to the bar to pour himself a scotch.

Tori appeared beside him. “This is hard enough to explain sober Phil.”

He snorted. “Well I'd say you could do it, but... they haven't made eye contact.”

“What a shame.”

He glared. When Coulson walked back to his office, it was to Skye watching him curiously. “Were you visiting one of your... cluster?”

He frowned, then realised some of his reaction must have shown on his face. “Yeah.” He grinned, “Well technically she was visiting me. I was never any good at hiding it.”

Izzy snorted. “That's an understatement.”

“Shut up Izzy.”

The kids were all smiling. “Izzy?”

Coulson rolled his eyes. “We'll get you guys synched up as soon as we can.” He said, “Next trip to the Hub maybe.”

Skye frowned. “What, we have to get some kind of surgery?”

Izzy snickered and Coulson shook his head. “Direct eye contact with another sensate will mean you can visit them any time, even if they're not in your cluster. The only exception is parents. Each cluster is made by a member of an existing cluster.”

Skye looked down. “It's May isn't it? She's our...” She couldn't say it.

“Yes.” Coulson said softly, feeling Izzy leave. “She made your cluster, and between Loki and I, it got pretty messed up.” When Skye looked confused he continued. “You were formed as I got stabbed. Mel- May felt it, and it interrupted your cluster being formed. She should have known who you all were right away, been able to visit you from that moment, but it was cut.”

Fitz spoke up. “Is that why there's three of us, but four of you?” He asked.

Skye repeated the question.

“Yes.” He said, “But a cluster can be anywhere from three to twelve members. We don't know how many there are in your cluster since you got broken up like you did.”

A knock on the door interrupted. “Sorry sir,” Jemma apologised, “This just seemed easier.”

He waved them in tiredly. “Have I missed anything?”

Tori and Izzy shook their heads, “Other than sharing and telepathy... no.”

“Good.”

“And Skye's connection to May. Should probably mention that.”

Phil groaned. “Tomorrow.”

He looked back to the kids. “Well?”

Jemma smiled politely. “Well, sir, we were wondering if there may be others in our- cluster, that we simply haven't connected with yet.”

“Entirely possible.” He said. “Why, have you been seeing something?”

Jemma and Fitz looked at each other. “Just- flashes.” He admitted. “But nothing that makes any sense.”

Coulson sighed. “Well hopefully it'll become clearer. The three of you seem to be connecting fine, so there are no problems with that. Let me know if any of you see anything else.”

“Yes sir.”

“And don't tell anyone. It's hard enough to keep ourselves safe without the world knowing.”

Chapter 7: In Their Heads

Skye couldn't sleep. She wasn't surprised. Even though she was mentally and physically exhausted, the stress was just too much. There was that weight behind her eyes that she knew wouldn't go away until she let herself cry and sob and scream.

She didn't want to though. She didn't deserve it. She'd lied to them. Her friends. She deserved their anger, she deserved this cuff.

She needed to apologise. Skye knew that. She would, to all of them. For now she would just curl up and fail to sleep.

“Skye?”

She looked up to see Jemma. She must have gotten the hang of visiting. Not that they'd had much trouble with that. “Hey.” She said flatly. “You should be asleep.”

Her bunk was small, but no more than the others. The oversized shirt and baggy pants she wore to sleep made her feel slightly vulnerable, though she noted that Jemma was wearing some pretty cute PJ's.

Jemma shrugged. “So should you.”

Skye looked down. “Was I keeping you guys up?”

Fitz appeared, and the two looked at each other. “Not in the way that you think.” Jemma said carefully.

“Sorry.” Skye muttered. “I- it's gotta suck to be stuck with me. I'll try to keep my thoughts to myself.”

Even though she knew they couldn't leave a weight on her bed, she still knew that they were closer. “Skye, we're just worried about you.” Fitz said softly.

“Yes.” Said Jemma, using one hand to gently brush her hair. “And you're doing an excellent job of demonstrating why.”

Skye swallowed, rolling away from them. “I'm fine.”

“No you're not, we can sense it, remember?” Skye was silent, and Jemma put a hand on her shoulder. “Skye, let us in, please.”

Skye took a shaky breath. “I-I'm not used to this.” She whispered.

Fitz smiled, sitting next to her. “Well none of us are. This whole mind reading thing isn't what I'd call normal.”

“People caring about me.”

Both froze. “Skye...”

“I'm sorry I lied to you.” She said quickly, sitting up. “I shouldn't have, I should have told you, but I didn't, cos I was scared, and I'm sorry.”

There was a moment of pause, during which Skye started to think the worst, before which two pairs of arms wrapped around her tightly. “Apology accepted.” Jemma murmured.

Skye froze. She didn't expect this. She expected... anger, hatred. She thought they would shut her out, push her away. Not pull her closer. She trembled slightly before collapsing into their embrace, struggling not to cry. “I know I'm not good at this whole... group thing.” She said, “But I promise I'm gonna try to be.”

Fitz laughed softly. “We were never very good at it either to tell you the truth.”

“Yes.” Jemma murmured into her hair. “That's why we were always paired together, because no one else wanted to work with us.”

“I dunno why.” Skye said, snuggling into the group hug. “You guys are the best.”

“So are you Skye.”

She wanted to believe it. She just couldn't. Not now. Skye's eyes started to feel heavy, and her head fell onto Fitz's shoulder. “Stay.” She asked softly.

Both smiled. “Always.”

May wasn't there for training the next day. Not that Skye was surprised. She knew she'd hurt them, and May didn't seem like the type to trust easily. Nor to let her off the hook. Still, she decided that training by herself was a start, and began to stretch.

Melinda watched quietly from the doorway, not speaking up. Skye couldn't see her. Wouldn't see her. And that was what she needed.

“She's determined.” Tori noted.

Melinda didn't reply.

“Don't tell me you're *that* angry at her.”

She glared.

Izzy appeared. “She's a good kid.”

“She lied to us.” Melinda said, finally speaking.

Izzy rolled her eyes. “Sure, but she didn't think you were ever going to get hurt.”

Tori and Izzy looked at Skye, then back to each other. “She's a good kid.” Izzy repeated.

Tori nodded. “Smart. Resourceful.”

“Good sense of humour.”

“Doesn't take crap.”

“Protective of her cluster. That's why she's training so hard.”

“Don't.” Melinda said stiffly. She knew what they were getting at. She didn't care.

“Mel, come on.” Izzy said, putting a hand on her shoulder. “She's exactly like you were at her age.”

“I said *don't.”* Melinda said sharply, and turned to walk away. She didn't need this.

Skye swallowed thickly as she heard May's footsteps retreat. Some childish, stupid part of her hoped that she would join her. That Skye could apologise, that May would understand.

It was dumb.

She continued to train.

After that, hearing that Coulson was up, Skye went to him, gently knocking on his office door. “Hey.”

He looked up from his morning coffee. “Skye.” He said, surprised.

Skye scratched at her ear, closing the door. “I- uh.” She hesitated. “I wanted to apologise, for... you know.”

Something in Coulson's eyes softened, and he gestured for her to sit. Skye did, fiddling with her hands. “I- I don't mean, like, cos you're my boss, or I want this thing off my wrist... I-I'm sorry cos you believed in me, and- I never really had that.” Skye swallowed. “I let you down, and I'm sorry.”

Coulson paused. “Thank you.” He said softly. “I appreciate it.”

Skye shifted. “Are you still mad at me?”

He sighed. “A little.” He nodded, “But that's my problem, not yours. I'm sure you're still mad at us for not telling you about being sensate.”

She shrugged. “Just... confused I guess. May's not talking to me.”

Coulson smiled gently. “I don't think it's for the reasons you're imagining.”

Skye nervously walked through the plane, trying to find May. She didn't know how it could be such a small place, but May stayed hidden from her. She momentarily toyed with the idea of just visiting to find out where she was, but discounted the idea.

Skye knocked softly on the cockpit door, but received no reply. She pulled it open, but saw that the plane was on autopilot. She sighed and turned, only to see May approaching.

Skye jumped, not hearing her, and took a moment to gather herself. “May, I...” She hesitated. May's face was unreadable. Skye sighed. “I- I wanted to apologise, for- for lying like that. I was scared, and it was stupid.”

May remained impassive. Skye wasn't sure what she was supposed to do. She shuffled her feet. “And- uh, sorry for not mentioning that one time I kinda hallucinated you too.” She mumbled, “I didn't really know what to do.”

May's jaw worked, and Skye got the impression that she was holding herself back. “What you can *do.”* She said in a cold voice, “Is stay the hell out of my head. Got it?”

Skye recoiled. May had always been tough, but she hadn't really felt

threatened by her before. “I- yeah, I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, I just-”

“You just thought you could snoop around and you can't. You don't get to just read my mind like a book.”

Skye took a step back, “O-okay.” She stammered, “I won't, I promise, just- please...” Before she finished and said something that made her even angrier, Skye hurried away. That sick feeling in her stomach was back.

As Skye stumbled through the common area, she found that she had collided with Coulson. “Sorry.” She muttered, trying to get past before he could see how upset she was. She could feel Fitzsimmons in the corner of her mind, but pushed them back.

“Woah, hey.” He caught her arm. “What's up?”

Skye took a breath, trying to regain her composure. “I just- I guess May's angrier at me than I thought.” She mumbled. “I- she said she doesn't want me in her head.”

Oh. “Don't take it personally.” He said, “She doesn't want anyone in her head.” Skye seemed to have calmed down somewhat, and he gestured for her to sit. “There's something you should know.”

Skye sat, rubbing her eyes. “I thought we were done with your info dump.”

“Not quite.” He said softly. “Skye, trauma in a cluster can do terrible things.” He glanced down. “I told you there are four in our cluster, and that's true. But there used to be six. When the others died, we almost tore ourselves apart.” Skye was looking on, eyes wide. “Another cluster that was made a little before ours had seven members. They all ended up together on a mission, but they were ambushed. Only one of them survived, and he's never been the same. Bobbi won't tell anyone who's in her cluster, that's how scared they all are.”

Skye swallowed. “What does this have to do with May?”

Coulson leaned back in the seat. “She'd always been good at hiding, blocking us out.” He said, then smiled, “When we were younger she'd use it to launch sneak attacks. Pranks.”

Skye rolled her eyes, “May did *not* pull pranks.”

He laughed. “I know, but she did.” He hesitated. “She... well, she used to be different.” Coulson smiled. “You remind me of her, a little.”

Skye bit her tongue to keep from arguing that point. “Then what happened?”

Coulson paused, and Skye got the impression it was almost too hard for him to talk about. “We- were on a mission, several years ago, in Bahrain. We were there to try to retrieve a powered individual, but things went south.” He clenched his fists. “Several of our agents and a civilian girl were taken, maybe to stop us following, I don't know.” He closed his eyes. “May- said she could get them out. She went in, alone. Blocked us out for some reason, and by the time I got in-.” He sighed. “It was like she was a different person. Since that day, she's blocked us all out. All she'll do is visit, but even that's only sometimes.”

Skye nodded, looking at the ground fixedly. “Then- how come I can get in? I mean, I hacked the doors for her. I- saw that name in her mind.”

“That's the thing Skye,” Coulson leaned forwards. “I don't know. Sharing and the psychic connection are only things you're meant to share with your cluster.” Skye stared. “By all rights you shouldn't be able to do any of that with May. Let alone past her walls.”

“That's why she hates me.”

She sounded so tearful that Coulson had to put a hand on her shoulder. “Hey, no.” He said, “She doesn't hate you. She's scared.”

“Of me.” Skye said, burying her face in her hands. “I don't want her to be scared of me.”

“Just give her a little time, Skye.” Coulson said. “I don't think she wants to be scared of you either. But she needs time to deal with this.”

“You scared her.”

“Damnit, I *know.”*

“You know what kind of childhood she had, do you think that was a good idea?”

“Shut *up* Izzy!”

“Hey, I like that kid!” She snapped back. “I don't want to see you

being so damn scared that you hurt her!”

Melinda glared. “I wouldn't hurt her, don't you know me better than that?!”

Izzy glared right back. “You know I don't mean physically. And you already have.”

“Just leave me alone, okay!”

Before Izzy could snap back, there was a knock on the cockpit door. They both fell silent, and Izzy looked to Melinda expectantly, waiting for her to open the door.

“May?” The voice made them both stop. “It's me, I- you don't have to let me in, I just wanna talk.” Izzy raised an eyebrow, and Melinda stayed in her seat. Skye put her hand against the door. “Look, I'm really sorry that I- did that.” She said, “I- it was an emergency, and I didn't get that you wouldn't want me to.” She bit her lip. “It was stupid, and I'm sorry. I promise I won't do it again, and I'll stay out of your thoughts as much as I can. I just- I know I complain a lot, but I really don't want to stop training with you.”

Izzy spotted the flicker of emotion on Melinda's face. When she didn't move, Izzy growled. “Melinda, I swear to god, if you don't go and talk to her right now-” Before she could finish, May had stood, and forcibly ejected her.

May walked to the door, keeping it shut. “I don't want to stop training you.” She said.

Skye perked up, but kept quiet.

Melinda sighed. “I know you didn't mean to, but you did, and that- it's forgiveable, Skye, but I need some time.”

“I can stay out of it.” Skye promised. “I will. I- I'm really sorry.” She said again, in a small voice.

“I know.” May said. “We'll start training again in a week or so.”

Skye sniffled. “Okay.”

Chapter 8: FZZT

Skye was sitting in the lab watching Fitz work quietly. She couldn't help but smile. It was kind of cute how he would mumble to himself, how she could sense him guessing the weight of the night night gun before actually testing it, how he questioned the scales rather than assume he was wrong.

“I can hear you you know.”

Skye sat up, “I'm being quiet.”

Fitz grinned. “Not here.” He said, tapping his temple.

Skye blushed a little. “Sorry.”

He shook his head, watching Jemma and Coulson leave the gym. “It's okay. I'm kind of getting used to it.”

Skye smiled. “Yeah. I know what you mean.” She paused. “Do you think there are- more, of us?”

Fitz cocked his head. “I mean, we know that Coulson and May are like us. And there's two more in their cluster, not to mention that other guy Coulson mentioned.”

“No, I mean- *us.”* Skye said earnestly. “In our cluster. Coulson said there used to be six in his, and the other one had seven. There are only three of us, isn't that... kind of small?”

“I guess.” Fitz mumbled, fiddling with the mechanism. “But it's not unheard of.”

“I know, I just-” Skye sighed. “Coulson said that our cluster was... interrupted. I didn't click with you guys until I saw you. What if there are others out there? That we just haven't found yet?”

Fitz rubbed his eyes. “Have you seen anything?” He asked, “Something different, someone new?”

“I-I don't know.” Skye muttered. “Sometimes I think it's the cockpit of a plane, but I don't know, that could just be May.”

“Thought you were trying to stay out of her business.”

“I am!” Skye exclaimed, “It's just- harder than I thought.”

Fitz looked up. “She training you again?”

Skye knew that he knew the answer, but she appreciated the sentiment behind the question. “No.” She said softly. “I mean, I get it, but... no.”

Fitz gave her a tight smile, “Well, she'll be really impressed when she does.” He said, “With all the solo stuff you've been doing.”

Skye snorted. “Pretty sure she'll say I've been doing it all wrong.”

“Possibly.” He conceded.

Skye hung back as May checked under the hood of the car, watching as Coulson headed towards the campsite the kids had been at.

“The battery blew straight up through the hood.” May called.

“Landed over here.” Fitz said, gesturing. “What could have done this? That distance...”

When May started to move towards where the others were, Skye took a few steps away. Melinda rolled her eyes. She knew that Skye was trying to do as she'd asked, but this was a little much. She might tell her to stop be so skittish. Later though.

“I don't get why they called us,” Skye said, seemingly annoyed. Fitz grinned, knowing that she hated the outdoors. “It seems like this thing is some freak lightning strike, why- *oh.”* She came to a halt, seeing the body floating five feet in the air. “Never mind.”

She could feel Fitzsimmons' thoughts whirling, trying to figure out what could have caused something like this. Her head was spinning. She didn't know how they did it.

“Well?” Coulson asked after a moment, “Any idea what could cause something like this?”

“Hell if we know.” Jemma muttered.

May looked to Coulson. “Could be a new weapon.”

“Or a freak natural disaster.” He placated.

Skye took a step closer. “Or could it be someone on your index?”

May shook her head. “Nothing like this on the index.” She said, briefly meeting Skye's eyes.

Skye couldn't help but smile. May was talking to her. Kind of.

“That we know of.” Coulson corrected. “We'll send it through to HQ, see what they can tell us.”

Jemma inched closer. “The mark on his forehead is odd.” She said, “Same as the marks on the truck.” As she leaned closer to look at the mark, a spark leapt from the body to her, and the body fell to the ground.

The three of them jumped, Skye instinctively inching closer to May. She swallowed. “Freaky.”

“Freaky.” Jemma agreed, looking down with mild distaste.

Skye could feel Fitz and Jemma snapping at each other from upstairs, and couldn't help but grin. She wasn't sure how either of them hadn't noticed their feelings for the other. Or the other's feelings for them. It was weird. But maybe not. Sometimes that was just how it worked.

She looked up from her computer when she heard footsteps, but promptly looked down again when she saw that it was May.

Melinda sighed. Okay. Now then. “Skye.”

“Hm!” Skye looked back up, her back straightening. “Yeah?”

Good god. Fitzsimmons weren't the only ones with that fresh faced optimism. The need to be wanted, to be helpful. “Look, I said stay out of my head.” She said, “I didn't mean to act like I've got a restraining order against you.”

Skye swallowed. “I just- it's hard.” She admitted. “It's like I can't control it, so- until I can, I'm trying not to risk it.”

“Look at me.” May said softly. When Skye did, she continued. “You can't do that by accident. You can share by accident, you can visit by accident, but you can't see into my mind by *accident.”*

Skye sighed. “But you- don't want me to do *any* of that.”

“No.”

Feeling bold, Skye asked. “Why not?”

Melinda bit her tongue, debating walking away. Instead she leaned against the other couch. “Because I don't trust easily. I don't connect easily. So when something like this is forced on me...”

Skye hesitated. “What are the others like? In your cluster.”

“Izzy,” May said with a soft smile, “And Tori. You'd like them. Especially Izzy. She's got a sense of humour, she's a good fighter. She doesn't lord over people because she's level seven.”

Skye toyed with her hands. “I- is it hard, to keep blocking them out?”

May shrugged. “You get used to it.”

“I'm sorry.”

“It's not your fault.” May said tiredly. “And it's not your problem. Just let me deal with it.”

It didn't take Skye long to track down the firefighters. She was actually pretty proud of herself. May and Coulson were looking around the firehouse while Jemma examined the second body. Skye approached, amused that Fitz was frantically blocking them both. “What are you looking for?”

“It's just odd.” Jemma murmured. “I thought these were entry wounds, but they're not. They're exit wounds.”

“What?” Fitz seemed to overcome his disgust in the face of curiosity. “Exit wounds, but- how is that possible? Oh, oh, what if the weapon made their brains overload, and let out the pulse?”

“Or it could be that it isn't a weapon at all!”

“Guys, I found it.” May's voice sounded. “It's a chitauri helmet.”

Jemma appeared beside May, looking at it. “It's not a weapon.” She said softly, looking closely. “Yet it caused a cranial discharge.”

Skye went to Coulson, who had his gun on their assumed killer. “What are you doing with the helmet!” He demanded.

Skye took in the floating pan, the sweat on him, how tired he looked. “What, the- the alien thing? That's a souvenir!” The pan dropped and they both jumped. “Damnit. Look, the first time anyone touched it was a couple of nights ago.”

“Why.” Coulson demanded.

“It had rust all over it, we were cleaning it!”

The implications hit Skye a moment after they hit Jemma, and she seized control of May's arms just before she touched it, pulling away. Both froze. “Oh god, I'm sorry!” Skye exclaimed, withdrawing, “I- it just happened, I-”

There was no answer.

May hurried towards Coulson, looking in. Diaz didn't look any better. Some feeling in her gut said that he wasn't going to get better.

“Clear everybody out.” He said softly. “Now.”

She did. Melinda let go of every instinct she had telling her to drag Coulson away kicking and screaming if necessary. She cleared out the firefighters. She listened to him talking to this man who was about to die, taking in how much his death had affected him as well as the rest of them.

May resolved to talk to him about it. Later though. For now she would just listen to Coulson lie about an afterlife she knew he couldn't remember, to ease this man's mind in his final moments. The firehouse was glowing blue, but she couldn't tear her eyes away from him. Phil.

Skye could sense Jemma's apprehension at the task. Finding a cure for an alien virus couldn't be easy. She tried to imagine finding a fix for an alien computer virus and it just hurt her head.

“Skye.” May found her at the bar as she left the cockpit, Coulson following to walk down to the lab.

Skye bit her lip. “I-I'm so sorry, May, I didn't mean to- I just...”

“Saved me from a deadly alien virus?”

Skye swallowed. “Is this you saying thank you?”

May's eyes narrowed, but she sat on a stool. “This is me saying it's

okay." She said. "It was an emergency. You acted on instinct."

"Is that a good thing?"

Melinda rolled her eyes. "You have good instincts."

Both stiffened, feeling the panic from their relative clusters. What it meant. Why they were scared.

"Oh no."

"We can't just sit here and watch her *die,* we have to do something!" Skye protested, heart pounding. She couldn't do this. Not now.

Coulson seemed overly calm by comparison. "There's only one person on this plane who can find a solution for this." He said, "And I'm willing to bet my life that she will."

May watched Fitz and Simmons working on opposite sides of the glass. They were so young. "She's just a kid."

Skye hurried up the stairs, away from them. She couldn't help. She wished she could help, but there was nothing she could do, and that killed her. Jemma could die, and it was totally out of her hands. There was nothing. She dove into her bunk, keeping her panic insulated inside her, crushing her pillow against her chest. She couldn't do this.

"Hey." Coulson said, standing by the door. "It's going to be okay."

Skye gasped a breath. "You think that." She said, "You don't know. Jemma could-could..." She couldn't say it.

Coulson sighed. "You're right." He said, "But sitting here isn't going to help."

"I can't do anything!" Skye snapped. "I can't find a cure, I don't even understand this thing! I-I can't *hack* the virus, Coulson!"

He waited a moment for her to calm down. "No." He agreed, "You can't. But you can hack *them.* Skye, they're scared. We're all scared, but they need to find a cure, and you know that neither of them work well under pressure."

Skye swallowed. "How am I supposed to fix it? Lend them some incense?"

Coulson sat down on the edge of her bed when Skye sat up. “Look. I know it's gotta be tough being in a cluster with those two. They're geniuses, and people called them by one name even before your cluster existed. But you can help. You can control your connection in a way they can't. You've done it before, do it now. I know that it can feel twisted in times like these. You just need to untwist it.”

Skye closed her eyes briefly. “That easy?”

Coulson shrugged. “Easy for some. Not for others. May was always terrible at it.”

Skye took a breath. “Okay.” She said. She could feel their anxiety and fear. She had it too. And maybe she couldn't get rid of her own, but she could help ease theirs. “Come on guys.” She murmured, “You can do this. We can do this.”

Jemma and Fitz felt themselves calm, regaining their initiative.

Fitz swallowed. “You have to fix this.” He said quietly.

Jemma fought back tears. “I don't know how Fitz. I can't-” She caught herself. “There's no one- to make an anti serum from,” She said softly, “Because no one's actually survived this. Except...”

Their eyes met, and it was like it all came together. “The chitauri.”

Fitz swallowed. “If the bastard who wore the helmet had the virus-”

“But managed to wear it for the entire time without emitting a charge-”

“Because he was immune!”

“Yes!” Jemma exclaimed, moving closer to the doors, “She was just the carrier! Like typhoid Mary!”

Before Fitz could open his mouth to reply, Skye crashed down the stairs, case in hand. “You guys done? This is what you need, right? Can you get on with it?”

Fitz stared, breathless, before taking the case from her and opening the lab doors.

“What, no!” Jemma protested. “You can't be in here!”

“Too late.” Fitz said as the doors shut behind him. “It's done. Just try

to keep your hands off me, yeah?"

Skye fought to keep calm as Coulson and May hurried down the stairs. She could lose both of them now. She would be alone. She could be, in less than an hour. "We're gonna fix this." Fitz said, catching Skye's eye through the glass. "Together."

Skye smiled tightly. She could feel Fitz's faith. They believed in her. The least she could do was believe in them too. She watched with bated breath as the two synthesised their vaccine. She fought to keep their joined emotions stable, burying her uncertainty and panic. She could do this.

She watched as Fitz caught the vaccine after Jemma made it float, she watched as they shocked it into the only remaining lab rat, and for a moment, one fleeting moment, she felt like they had done it. That as a team, they'd saved the day.

Then she saw the rat start to float, and it was like the floor had given out from under her.

"No." Fitz moved to examine it, and Jemma looked to Coulson.

She forced a smile. Her face was pallid and scared. But accepting. "Sir, I know the protocol in these situations." She said, "But could you please tell my dad first?" A couple of tears escaped her eyes. "I just think my mum would take it better coming from him."

Coulson's throat worked. "There's still time." He said.

Jemma swallowed the lump in her throat. "Sir please."

Skye felt a stab of denial when Coulson gave a simple nod. A moment later, two weak arms had wrapped around her, but at the same time, hadn't. Skye clung to Jemma back, trying not to cry, to be strong for her.

Jemma gasped. "I'm so sorry Skye." She murmured. "I-I know you think you need me, but you're brilliant, I mean that."

Skye couldn't stop the tears. "Don't go Jemma."

Jemma buried her face in her shoulder. "I don't want to." She said, "These last months with you, on this plane, they've been the best of my life, truly, and I wouldn't have missed it." She sniffed. "Look after Fitz for me."

“Jemma come on.”

But she was gone, back behind the glass. “Would you mind if I had a brief moment alone with Fitz?”

Coulson nodded, and Skye continued to cry quietly when May's hand wrapped around her shoulder, gently pulling her away. She wanted to stay. She wanted to see Jemma one more time, hug her, joke with her. But she couldn't. All Skye could do was block off her grief from them. Fall apart alone. That was all she could ever do.

It wasn't the blow to Fitz's head that told Skye that something was off. Nor was it Jemma's combination of despair and determination, or Fitz's screaming at her to stop.

No. What told Skye that something was wrong was the feeling of being thrown off balance.

The lack of a plane beneath her feet.

Wind howling in her ears.

It wasn't until Skye fell over, Coulson and May hurrying to her, that she opened the connection again, and Fitz's panic claimed her. “Oh no.”

“Skye!” Their tense voices pulled her back. “What is it, what's happening?”

She gasped for air. “Jemma- she- no, Fitz- *don't!”* It was too late. They were spinning through the air with a parachute badly strapped to Fitz's back as he haphazardly tried to find Jemma.

“Skye!” May's voice brought her back to reality. “What happened?”

She shook violently. “They- they jumped, both of them. F-Fitz has a parachute, the- it worked, the vaccine works.”

May took her hand. “Okay. This will be rough, but we can do it.”

Skye blinked. “We?”

The next thing she knew, she was there, with Fitz, no, *in* Fitz, but she wasn't controlling him. Someone else was. Someone who was neither her, nor Fitz.

May spread Fitz's limbs, eyes scanning for Jemma in the air. Her arms closed when she saw her, diving closer until she managed to wrap Fitz's limbs around her. She seized the anti serum, pressing it firmly against Jemma's thigh.

An electrical discharge had never felt so satisfying.

The sudden jerk of a parachute was something Skye would think was a relief, but never this much. She stayed with them even after May left, holding them both close.

They were her cluster.

They were made to be together.

Although Skye was exhausted, she woke at five as usual. It seemed that she'd successfully reset her body clock. She didn't get up though. She was tired and emotionally drained. She'd just lay in her bunk until the others started to get up too.

After ten minutes there was a knock on her bunk door. Skye stared as it slid open. May. Of course. No one else would be up at this time.

May raised an eyebrow. “Training started ten minutes ago.”

Skye blinked, realising what she was saying. Training. With May. Again. She felt that pang in her chest, and pushed herself up into a sitting position. “Okay, sorry, I- guess I forgot.” If May wasn't going to mention the elephant in the room, she wasn't either.

“Hm.” She hummed, “Don't do it again.”

Skye nodded. “Yeah, I won't.” She gnawed on her lip. “Thanks.”

Melinda nodded quietly.

Chapter 9: The Hub

May didn't find it remotely surprising that Skye didn't like being blocked out of the mission process. To be honest, she'd expected it from the moment she set foot on the plane. A hacker would never be happy being told they couldn't know something.

She sat down on the couch with a huff. “How is this even *supposed* to work?” She asked testily. “You're level seven, but you've got a psychic connection with Coulson. I'm not even a SHIELD agent and I've got a connection with you.”

Melinda raised an eyebrow. “Which you wouldn't exploit for information.”

Skye sighed, “No, but- I *could.* So could you. Isn't that a problem?”

“SHIELD doesn't know about sensates.” She said. “So no. It's not a problem.”

“Why though?” Skye asked. “Shouldn't we be on the index or something?”

“Do you want to be?”

Skye glared at the ground. “No, but-”

“Look, being sensate can be dangerous.” May said, “It can be the best thing that's ever happened to you, but it can also kill you. My cluster's parent told us how they used to be scared all the time. Of being captured, experimented on, killed. So we don't tell anyone.”

Skye still didn't look happy.

Melinda rolled her eyes. “Just go with it.” She said, “And cheer up. Izzy and Tori are at the Hub.”

That got her. Skye looked up with wide eyes. “Really?! That's awesome!” She paused for a moment, biting her lip. “I- do they want to meet me?”

“Of course they do.” May sighed, “They love you.”

Skye smiled shyly. “They do? Wait, how'd they- they can't visit me.”

“No.” She agreed, “But they can visit *me.”*

Skye grinned. “They hang over your shoulder like little angels?”

“The most annoying angels in the world.”

“I resent that.” Izzy said, “I'm not the one who abused our connection to watch *Survivor* when I was on a mission. You still owe me for that.”

May smirked. “Go to hell.” She muttered. She actually felt... good.

Skye was looking at her. “They here?”

“Izzy.”

“Cool.” Skye said. “Uuh, hi Izzy.”

Izzy beamed. “I'll see her soon.” She said, “I can't wait.”

Melinda gave a tiny smile and Skye's eyes widened. “What'd she say?”

“She can't wait to meet you.”

Feeling Fitzsimmons' excitement about visiting the Hub was almost unnerving. Skye knew that the two of them got excited about most things, but a giant building full of boring paper pushers?

“Oh *honestly* Skye, it's more than just some filing cabinets.” Jemma's voice interrupted.

They were in the lab on the Bus, packing up equipment to take with them. “Yeah.” Fitz said, “There's some great labs.”

Skye shrugged. “You guys have a lab here.”

Jemma shot her a reproaching look. “Bigger labs.”

“There are *bigger* labs?” Skye asked, keeping a straight face. “I thought this was the biggest lab ever.”

When they gaped at her, Skye couldn't hold it anymore and burst out laughing. Fitz glared and Jemma rolled her eyes. “Oh yeah, really funny Skye.” Fitz muttered, stowing the night night gun.

Skye giggled, and some of her apprehension eased. No matter what, they were still her cluster. Her friends.

Walking into the Hub was weird. Some instinct told her to run away. It was so clean and organised and everyone was wearing the same suit. She felt small. Even more so when everyone but her got a badge. She wasn't really part of this. Not yet.

May's hand brushed her arm in a way that would be an accident from anyone else, and she felt a little better. She wasn't a part of SHIELD yet, but she was a part of them. Skye smiled tightly as they walked towards another agent. “Is there any chance we can run a check for the redacted file?” She asked Coulson softly.

He looked to her, preparing to be the bad guy, but couldn't when he saw the look in her eye. He softened. “I'll look into it.” He said, “I promise. But for now we have other matters to deal with.”

Skye curbed her impulse to argue, opting instead to remain silent. It was hard, but she needed to earn their trust back. Earn her way into SHIELD.

That didn't mean she was happy when her bracelet snapped to the wall, effectively shackling her. Skye scowled. “You could have just said 'wait here.'” She muttered.

“We'll be back.” Was all he said.

Fitz and Jemma hovered awkwardly around. Skye could feel their desire to go to the labs. “Just go.” She muttered, annoyed at the world. “I'll be fine.”

Jemma bit the inside of her lip. “We'll grab that cable you were looking for, so you can connect your laptop to the holotable.”

Skye forced a smile. “That'd be great, thanks Jemma.”

She watched them hurry away. Now she was alone. Until Coulson and May came back to pick her up. Like she needed supervision. Like she was going to do anything.

Skye sighed. This sucked. She couldn't blame anyone. It just sucked. She hated that they didn't trust her. She hated that they had a reason.

“Hey.” An unfamiliar voice said, and Skye looked up to see a woman walking towards her with two take-away coffees in her hand. She had dark hair and knowing eyes. “You look like you need this.”

Skye frowned. “I- uh, thanks.” She said, taking it. “I'm- Skye.”

“Isabelle Hartley.” She greeted. “Boring place to hang out.”

Skye shrugged, “Well I don't have that much choice in the hanging out part.” She said, tugging at her wrist. “I don't know why a SHIELD agent's buying me coffee. Doesn't this mark me as some kind of...”

“Outsider?” Isabelle finished. “Well, kind of. I had to wear one of those myself for a while. It's been upgraded a bit since then.”

Skye's face twitched into a smile. “Yeah?”

“Mm-hmm. I used to be a merc. They don't trust us much either.”

Either? “What do you think I am?”

Isabelle's eyes narrowed, taking her in. “You're a hacker, right? I mean, you look strong enough, but not merc level. Put your age on top of that, and how paranoid they have to be to give you one of those... I'd say hacker. Not that that means you can't be good for SHIELD.”

Skye nodded. “Yeah. I- I made a dumb mistake, I-” She shook herself. “It was just dumb.”

Isabelle shrugged, leaning against the wall and taking a sip of her coffee. “Probably.” She acknowledged, “But everyone makes dumb mistakes from time to time. It's not the end of the world.” She paused. “Do you want me to drink some of that to prove it's not poison?”

Skye jumped, “No, I- sorry, I just kind of...” Isabelle nodded to the cup and Skye took a grateful sip. “Nice.” She said appreciatively.

Isabelle grinned, “Yeah, not many places around here that make decent coffee.” She nodded across the atrium. “It's right over there, left at the stairs.” She smirked. “I doubt your supervising officer would show you. Mellie hates coffee.”

“Mellie?” *Wait...*

Just as Skye started to get suspicious, the doors slid open, May emerging. She crossed her arms, trying and failing to look annoyed. “Are you done messing with her?”

Skye's wide eyes flickered between them as Isabelle pulled May into a rough, one armed hug, laughing softly. “Missed you Mel.”

“Shut up Izzy.”

Skye beamed. *Izzy.* “Oh my God, I- hi, it's so great to meet you.”

Izzy smiled, “Likewise.” She said, still holding on to May. “You're not as tall as you look from Mel's eyes.”

May punched her on the shoulder and Izzy drew away, mocking pain. Skye couldn't help the happy, bubbly feeling inside. There was a certain lightness to May that she didn't usually see. She had a feeling the height thing was an ongoing joke. “Yeah, I'm not that tall.” She said, “More than some though.”

May glared. “I can leave you here.”

Izzy grinned. “I can let her out.” She said, “See how much trouble we can stir up together.”

Belatedly, Melinda realised that these two meeting was probably a terrible idea.

Skye knew that she should help Fitz with the doors. But to be honest, it was just too funny to watch him struggle. She could feel that May was amused too, so she didn't feel so bad. Besides, none of them were helping him. It wasn't until the doors locked him in that she felt motivated to help him access the door panel to open them again.

Fitz stomped out, unhappy. “Well a lot of bloody help you were.” He grumbled, going to his trolley.

Coulson hid a smile, walking to him. “Fitz, we're going to need you to come and meet Agent Hand. All of you actually, if that's alright. We'll have someone send your tools to the Bus.”

Izzy grinned, walking with them. “Agent Hand.” She said ominously, but there was a glimmer of humour in her eyes.

Skye cocked her head. “Is she okay?”

She missed Coulson and May's smirks, “Victoria Hand is a terrifying, dangerous woman.” Izzy said seriously.

“Oh stop.” Victoria said, catching them unawares before they made it to the conference room door. “You're making me blush.”

Skye looked from May, Coulson, and Izzy, and back to Agent Hand. Agent Victoria Hand. *“Oh.”* She breathed, “Victoria Hand.” She said softly to Fitz and Jemma.

Jemma squeaked, but Skye knew that they hadn't got it yet. “Guys, Vic*tori*a Hand.” She said, “Tori.”

Fitz choked on air, “No way.”

Jemma was almost bouncing. “Oh, this is amazing!”

Coulson could feel the amusement of the others. It was kind of cute. “You know, they didn't geek out when they met me.” He said. “Do kids not think I'm cool?”

“No one thinks you're cool Phil.” Tori said flatly.

Skye laughed, muffling it immediately. Tori shook their hands in turn. “Nice to finally meet you in person.” She said, making quick eye contact with each of them.

Fitzsimmons were stunned into silence, so Skye replied. “Yeah, you too.” She smiled. “It's great to put faces to names.”

“Well there's one more face then.” Tori said, opening the door, “Everyone, this is Bobbi Morse. She'll be leading a two man operation to Ossetia to disable the so called overkill device.”

Bobbi. Skye thought. Well, at least she knew this was another sensate beforehand. They were falling out of the woodwork at the Hub.

The conference room was darker than Skye expected. It smelled like leather and air fresheners, which wasn't surprising. There was a large screen on the wall, currently turned off, and a round table surrounded by office chairs before it. She considered making a joke about doctor strangelove when she saw the weird light suspended from the ceiling, but held back.

There was also a woman, younger than Skye expected. She had long blonde hair and wore a black T-shirt and jeans. She was also really tall. Skye needed a picture of her and May standing side by side. She looked up when they entered. “Hey, the whole gang's here.”

Tori rolled her eyes. “They would be if we knew who was in your cluster Barbara.”

Bobbi glared. “Sorry not everyone's as friendly as you *Victoria.”*

Tori smirked. “This is Bobbi Morse.” She introduced to the kids. “Don't call her Barbara or she'll bite your head off.”

Bobbi grinned. “Only if I think you're cute.” She said, throwing Fitz a wink. He turned red, eyes flickering to the floor. Bobbi looked between them all. “Everyone been briefed on the mission?”

Skye looked around. “Uuh, no?” She said, “But I don't know if I'm supposed to.”

Tori raised an eyebrow, and Skye wondered if May got that from her, or if it was the other way around. “Agent Morse is going to be leading a two man operation to disable a dangerous device in hostile territory.”

Something about the way she said it made Skye uneasy. Or maybe she was just picking up on Fitz's feelings since Bobbi was still looking at him in a way that seemed to say 'fresh meat'. “Who's the other agent?”

Bobbi raised her eyebrows. “Seriously?” She said to Tori and the others. “You trying to get me to tell them?”

Tori shrugged. “It was worth a shot.” She said, stepping forwards. “Agent Fitz, we need someone who can disable the device on site.” He stared. Skye could feel his dread, mirroring hers and Jemma's. “I think you're the man for the job.”

Fitz swallowed, straightening. “Yes ma'am.” He said seriously.

“And there's one more thing.” Tori said, now visiting them all. “Officially this mission has no extraction plan. You two are not supposed to know this.”

“What the hell?!” Skye burst out, unable to keep quiet. “They wanna leave Fitz to die?! That's bullshit!”

She refused to feel ashamed when the others stared, and Izzy spoke. “Officially?”

Tori nodded. “Also officially, you have a plane and a decent pilot.” She said, “Which won't have another mission until Agents Fitz and Morse have completed their mission.”

They all paused, absorbing the information. Coulson smirked. “Tori,” He said, “Are you trying to encourage us to break the rules?”

She raised an eyebrow and Izzy and Bobbi smiled. “All I'm doing is explaining the situation Phil. Do what you want with the information.”

He grinned easily. “Spoilsport.”

Fitz was quiet on their drive out to the border. He was scared. He knew that the others were worried about him. They couldn't hide it. He understood. But he had to be strong. He could do this.

Bobbi glanced over at him from the driver's seat. “You been to Ossetia before?”

Fitz shook his head quietly.

“It's nice. Some of the locals are... less nice.” Fitz remained silent, toying with his tools. Bobbi cocked her head. “Have you... been in the field before?”

Fitz looked up, surprised, and shook his head. “No. Couldn't even pass my field test.”

“Ugh. That sucks.” Bobbi muttered. “You'll be fine, okay? Fighting's what I'm here for, and trust me,” She tapped her temple, “It's not just me.”

Fitz hesitated. “Wh-why don't you tell anyone who they are?”

Bobbi looked at him and smiled. “Cos they don't want me to. They'd rather keep to themselves, and I'm not gonna be the asshole that sells them out.”

“Are they in SHIELD?” Bobbi raised an eyebrow and Fitz scrambled to apologise, “Sorry, I didn't mean- I'm not trying to find out who they are, honestly.”

Bobbi shrugged. “The others are, all the time.” She smiled, “They think I don't know, but...”

Fitz looked down. “Sorry.” He muttered.

“It's okay.” Bobbi said, “I get it. Hell, it'd make my life easier, but... I can't do that to them.”

“You're a good friend.”

She smiled. “Thanks Fitz.”

When the two had made it into the truck, Bobbi smirked. “EMP?”

Fitz brightened, pulling it out of his back pocket. “That obvious?”

She shook her head. “No. Not to them, and that's what matters. Great job.”

Fitz grinned, returning the device. “Thanks.”

They both stilled at the sound of shouting, then gunshots. “Head down.” Bobbi said softly, inching towards the opening.

Fitz fought to keep his breathing steady. *Just stay calm.* He thought. Then Skye was there. “Fitz what is it, what's going on?”

“Now's not really the time Skye.” She said tightly.

Bobbi seized the barrel of the gun that started to move back the tarp, driving the butt into their would-be attackers face. She drew her batons and jumped out of the truck, felling their attackers. “Fitz!” She called.

“Come on!” He cried, sprinting away from the truck towards the border.

Bobbi caught up easily, eyes scanning for assailants. When they finally made it to cover, both were breathless. “I don't know why you weren't cleared.” She gasped, “If you can make that run.”

Fitz panted. “A-are you saying that I should have *died* just then?”

Bobbi groaned, leaning against the dried up rainwater pipe they'd found themselves in. “I mean- maybe? I'm sorry, I'm not helping.”

“You think?!”

Skye and Jemma appeared, “Fitz, oh my God, are you okay?”

“Oh yeah, I'm fine guys, except for the part when *I should have died!*”

Bobbi held up her hands, “I said sorry, jeez.”

Fitz scowled, but none of it seemed to calm down Skye and Jemma. “Wait, you could have died?!”

Crap. “No, but I'm fine, really.”

Bobbi snorted. “Aaand he sticks the landing.”

“Shut up.” Fitz muttered, and Bobbi grinned. She liked these kids. Like a little troupe of ducklings.

She spoke up, “Look, I swear he'll be okay.” Bobbi said, mostly to Jemma. She could see the silent panic. “I know what I'm doing and he knows what he's doing. He's got you guys, and I've got... well, my guys. So we'll be good, just relax.” She spoke now just to Jemma and Skye, “You guys freaking out isn't helping him.”

Skye swallowed. “Right, okay.”

“Yes, of course, we just need to calm down.” Jemma took a deep breath. “I'm sorry.”

Bobbi smiled. “It's okay. You guys are new to this. And hey, if you ever wanna talk... well, you can always find me now.”

Skye shifted. “Thanks... Bobbi.”

The two of them vanished.

Bobbi gestured for them to crawl further into the pipe. “We should stay here for tonight.” She said, “Wait for it to blow over. We'll have enough time to get there tomorrow no problem.”

Fitz nodded. “Jemma made me a sandwich.” He said, “If you want some.”

Bobbi grimaced. “Sorry buddy. They've got dogs tracking us. And, you know, dogs like sandwiches.”

“Oh. Right.”

Fitz couldn't help but feel immensely proud of himself. He'd done it. He even kicked a couple of bad guys, and that never hurt. He was back, he was safe, and so was Bobbi. The mission was a success, even with the 'unexpected' rescue at the last minute. May gave him a nod as they walked through the Hub, and Coulson smiled, patting him on the back. “Great job Fitz.”

He smiled shyly. “Thank you sir.”

And sure, May Coulson and Izzy had pulled off the extraction, but Skye was the one who almost knocked him over with the strength of her hug when he made it back, and Jemma was the one who made him feel like he'd really done something. Neither of them even poked

fun of him when he excitedly told them what had happened, even though he knew that they already knew.

That was just what friends did though. Right?

Melinda could feel Skye's emotions at the information Coulson was giving her. Disbelief, happiness, relief. He clearly hadn't told her everything, or those emotions would be a little different.

When he returned to the office, she turned her head. “What'd you tell her?”

He sighed, “The truth. That a SHIELD agent dropped her off at the orphanage.”

She shot him a reprimanding look, and Phil sat down. “What good would it do?” He asked tiredly. “It'd just torture her. I can't do that.” He hesitated. “Some secrets are meant to stay secret.”

May made no move to agree or disagree. She knew that Skye didn't feel the same way about secrets as they did.

“Will you help me find out what happened?”

Melinda sighed internally. She was keeping secrets from Phil, Tori, and Izzy. From Fury. Now she would have to keep secrets from Skye too. Not that it mattered. They weren't that close.

Besides... this was for Skye. She needed the truth. This wasn't something she would let go. Melinda sighed. “I can try.” She said softly.

Chapter 10: The Well

“Okay, I'm just saying guys, this mission it's my turn to almost die.”

“Skye.”

“Not that having a tree fall on me is the same as almost being killed by border police.”

“Please stop.”

“Or jumping out of a plane.”

“Skye, *please.”* Jemma said, “It's hard enough doing this without you bringing up me falling to certain death.”

“Oh, sorry.” She muttered. “I- I could do it for you, if you want.”

Jemma slowly moved up the fallen tree. “No, it's fine, just- I'd like if you could be quiet, please.”

“Okay.” Skye said, smiling up at her as she visited from the ground. “You're doing great.”

Jemma rolled her eyes. “Don't patronise me.”

Skye grinned. “Whoo, go Jemma!” She cheered, getting a dour glare.

Jemma climbed carefully further up the tree, secretly grateful that Skye followed. She knew she was strapped in, but it was nice to know that she was there. She leaned down, scanning the area where the object had been embedded. “Oh dear.” She groaned. “Definitely not from Earth. Fitz, are you getting this?”

“Yep,” He said pulling up the specs on the holotable. “It's okay, doesn't look like it's chitauri.”

“Oh good.” Jemma sighed. She appeared beside him. “Wait, those readings look familiar...”

“Thor's hammer.” Fitz said, staring at the readings. “Whatever that thing is, it's Asgardian.” Both went back to the tree. “Looks like there's an imprint. Do you mind scanning it so we can print a 3D model?”

“No problem Fitz.” She said, pulling the scanner from her pocket.

“Just say when.”

“Got it.” He said, pulling up the hologram. “It looks like a staff, maybe?”

“Guys?” Skye spoke up. “We've got something you might want to see.” She and May looked at the news footage, feeling the others appear behind them.

“This isn't good.”

“No.” May said, “But we know they're not gods.”

Skye looked at the model. “How are we supposed to find the other pieces before them?” She asked incredulously, “They found it when it was *inside* a tree in the middle of a forest.”

Coulson looked at her. “What are you getting at?”

Skye knew that the others would give her crap for it, but she said it anyway. “What if it called to them, like, with magic?”

May gave her a look. “Called to them.” She repeated as Jemma and Fitz scoffed.

Skye rolled her eyes, “Look, magic's just what you call science you can't understand, right?!” She snapped at Fitzsimmons. “Might as well look at it to figure this crap out.”

Both recoiled at her outburst, but Skye refused to feel bad about it. It wasn't her fault she didn't have a fancy degree like them. She put up a wall, not caring that she had basically done the sensate equivalent of locking herself in her room.

“That's exactly what we're going to do, actually.” Coulson said, and Skye looked up.

“Wait, really?”

He shot her a smile. “Sure, that's what I did when we found the hammer in New Mexico. Consulted an expert on Norse mythology.”

“Oh. Cool.”

Coulson turned to May. “Can you set a course for Seville?”

She shrugged. “Well I don't have anything else to do today.”

Skye had turned down the offer to go to the boring university, instead opting to stay on the Bus. May immediately took the opportunity to get her to train more, though Skye couldn't fault her for it. She needed to be good at *something.* She set into the bag with restrained gusto, trying not to let on how useless she felt.

“Keep your arms up.”

Skye grimaced, realising that she had been dropping them. “Sorry.” She muttered.

May raised an eyebrow. “Something on your mind?”

“No.”

“Okay.” May didn't believe her for a second. Not that it mattered. Skye wouldn't take to her, nor should she. Melinda knew that she was no good as a shoulder to cry on, a sympathetic listener.

Skye stilled after the next hit, tilting her head as if she were listening to something.

May knew that she was keeping the connection open with Fitzsimmons. “Got anything?”

She shook her head. “No, they just arrived.” Skye pulled a face. “Gross. I'm *pretty* sure this guy's dating a student. Is that allowed?”

May shrugged. “As long as no one finds out. Anything relevant?”

Skye frowned. “Apparently the thing's called the Berserker Staff? It makes people super strong and really angry. And it was cut into three pieces. Those two will be after the others.”

May nodded. “Towel off, we should start looking.” She picked up her tablet, looking for viking routes. Hopefully the others would get more information.

“Yes sir.” Skye muttered, shuffling to the shower.

Melinda rolled her eyes and walked up the stairs to the conference room. Something was definitely bothering her. More than usual, but it wasn't her job to fix that.

She pulled up maps of the routes on the wall panel, and was scanning Baffin Island when Skye arrived, towel drying her hair. “Got anything?”

May shook her head. “Not yet.” She said, “It doesn't look like the agents on the ground have found anything on Baffin Island.”

Skye leaned forwards over the table to look more closely at the screen. “Vikings doesn't mean Asgardians though, maybe we should check out other areas.”

May nodded to the controls. “All yours.”

Skye couldn't help the brief twinge of apprehension at having the mission placed in her hands, but she took it anyway. It wasn't like she had a choice. She typed for a moment, then frowned. “Guys? Apparently there were some routes... here.”

Fitzsimmons and Coulson stopped walking for a moment, “What, in Seville? Vikings raided Seville?”

Skye swallowed, “A couple of times, yeah. I- we found one place that's got Viking relics. It's like a church build on a crypt built on... whatever.”

“Okay, good job Skye.” Coulson said, heading to the car.

Skye bit her lip. “There is bad news too.”

“Of course there is.”

“The message boards online are talking about going underground. Which could mean they think it's here too.”

“Great.” Coulson muttered. “I- we need you two out here.” He suddenly sounded uncomfortable, and when Skye glanced at May she saw a smirk growing on her face.

May fought not to sound smug. “How should we get there Coulson?” She asked innocently. “You have the jeep.”

He groaned. “You know how.” Coulson said grumpily. “Just do it.”

Skye caught on, grinning. “Sorry, how?” She asked, “Should we run? Cos that might take a while.”

“Just- take...” He mumbled.

“Sorry, I didn't catch that.”

“Take Lola, okay?!”

Skye had to fight desperately to keep from laughing, and she could see that May was doing the same. “Oh,” She said, “If you insist.”

“You're a terrible person Melinda.”

“You asked for it.”

Skye kept her gun in it's holster, but ready to take it as she crept through the dark, spider web filled corridors. It was gross and creepy, but this was her job now. This was what she did.

“How are you two going?” Coulson asked.

Skye scowled. “Glad that I got the slightly less creepy option.”

“Well, May's never been one to turn down a challenge.”

Jemma spoke up, looking on from a scanner, “Skye, there are some unusual readings up ahead, turn left at the next fork.”

“Aye aye.” She muttered.

Skye jogged around the corner, “I've got them.” She said, grabbing the man by the shoulder.

Coulson stared from behind her. “Professor Randolph?”

Skye kept a hold on his arm. “Professor.” She greeted, hoping she sounded cool, “I'm gonna have to ask you to give me that stick-” She broke off with a choked breath when her hand brushed the staff piece.

She felt sick, she felt dizzy, the ground was gone from under her, she was falling.

Strong arms caught her before she hit the ground. “Skye, what happened?! Come on, talk to me!”

She rocketed away, swinging wildly at whoever it was.

May ducked the punches easily. “Skye calm down, look at me. You have to breathe.”

Thankfully Skye did as she was asked, but her eyes were still wider than they should have been, cheeks flushed , and she was trembling. “He-he has the staff.”

“Coulson.” May muttered. “Go get him.” She pulled Skye's arm over her shoulder. “Come on, we need to get you out of here.”

“I'm fine.” Skye mumbled, trying and failing to push her away.

She was still saying the exact same thing when Jemma and Fitz had her hooked up to half a dozen machines back at the Bus. “Guys, I'm *fine.”*

“You certainly are not.” Jemma said, “Agent Coulson told us to have a look at you and that's what we're doing.”

Skye swallowed a growl. “I said I'm fine. I feel normal.”

Both of them scoffed. “You know that doesn't work, right?” Fitz said, wrapping a blood pressure cuff around her arm.

“Yes.” Jemma agreed, “We know exactly how that staff felt and it was definitely not normal.”

Skye snapped, ripping the cuff from her arm. “Well what the hell do you two know about normal anyway?!” She said poisonously. “What's normal? Parents sending you to some great school and telling you how *great* you are? Everyone lining up to tell you you're the fucking *best* at everything?!” They were shrinking away from her. Skye didn't care. Instead she just stormed off to her bunk, the only place she could be alone.

Fitz swallowed. “She didn't mean that.”

“No.” Jemma agreed, fighting back tears.

Skye continued to stew alone in her bunk, forcing Fitzsimmons back. She wasn't entirely sure if it was because she was protecting them, or was angry at them. She felt sick. She felt... wrong.

“Hey kid.” Skye looked up to see Izzy. “You don't look so good.”

Skye swallowed heavily. She liked Izzy. She really did. But right now she wasn't in the mood to talk. She wasn't in the mood to spill her guts and cry on someone's shoulder about her shitty shitty childhood. “Please go away.” Skye said softly. “I-I really can't talk right now.”

Izzy frowned, looking around. “Doesn't look like you're that busy.” She said, sitting down. “Is there anything I can do?”

Skye shook her head. “No. Just... leave me alone.”

Izzy sighed softly, resting a hand on her shoulder. “Look after yourself Skye. If you change your mind, well... I'm always here.”

Izzy let herself leave Skye, instead going to Coulson and May. “Something's up with Skye.”

May said nothing and Coulson said, “We know.” In a tight voice.

Izzy rolled her eyes. “You think you should do something about it?”

”We are.” Melinda said, gesturing to the interrogation room where Coulson was.

Tori appeared. “Need a hand Phil?”

“I'd appreciate it.” He said softly, letting her take over the questioning. He visited May and Izzy outside. “There's something about him that's... odd.”

Both raised their eyebrows. “Odd how?”

“I don't know, just... does he seem a little too calm to you?”

“Well you have met before.” May said, “He probably thinks you're friends since you make friends with everyone you meet.”

Izzy grinned and Coulson sighed. “Still.” He said, “He's in an interrogation room on a plane owned by a government organisation, and he's not even flinching.” He paused. “I have a terrible idea.”

Randolph did look uncomfortable as Jemma entered the room with a polite smile and some medical tools. “And what exactly are you here for?” He asked.

“Oh, well it's usual practice for us to keep files on those who have proven to be interesting to SHIELD,” She said, “Blood tests, mostly, nothing major.”

“Uh huh.”

When Jemma got close enough to draw blood with her syringe however, Randolph gripped her wrist hard. Very hard.

Much too hard for a man of his age and apparent physicality. Before she could panic, Skye seized control of her, twisting away. Jemma backed away as Coulson and May entered the cell. “Gotcha.” He said smugly.

Randolph raised an eyebrow, casually breaking the cuffs holding him. “Okay.” He said, “I have to ask. How'd you know?”

“Call it a hunch.” He said. “And I've met Asgardians before.”

Skye couldn't think straight. She could hardly breathe. The best she could do was shield Fitz and Jemma from this terrible feeling, and she wasn't even doing that right. She could feel it. Feel them watching her, trying to get her to let them in. They didn't understand. Maybe that was for the best.

But she couldn't let them take the staff, any of them.

She wrenched the piece of staff from Randolph's chest, swinging it at the man. She didn't care who he was. All she knew was she was angry, angrier than she'd ever been in her life. She could hear them all in the back of her mind. Her parents. Her families. All of the families. She pushed them back. She didn't need them. She didn't need anyone.

May watched in horror as Skye started fighting the insurgents. “I'll get her.” She said, running down after her.

Coulson could see that whatever Skye was going through was affecting the other two, but they seemed to have it under wraps. “Okay, what do I need to do?”

Jemma swallowed, shaking. “I-you need to stop the bleeding around his heart, keep it working long enough for him to heal.”

“Got it.”

“Skye!” May shouted as she reached the atrium. “Let go of the staff.”

“No.” Skye growled, charging as more people arrived.

She hit wildly with the staff fragment. It burned hot inside of her, everything was so raw and hot and wrong. She could see them, telling her that she just wasn't right for them, that she needed a different family, on the phone asking the agency if there was anything they could do.

A distant, panicked part of her mind forced her connection with Fitzsimmons shut. She couldn't let them see. If they saw then they would know the truth, that she was a screw up, useless, not worthy of anyone's care or attention.

May could feel the fury coming off Skye in overwhelming waves. It was too much.

Jemma and Fitz groaned, suddenly light-headed. Coulson looked up. “You guys okay?”

Jemma replied first, breathless, “That staff is- well...”

“It's something.” Fitz gasped.

“Just hang on.” Coulson said, “She's got this.”

May's concern faded as the last assailant was felled. Skye continued to grip the staff pieces, but had fallen to her knees, tears running down her face. She couldn't do it, that much was clear. “Skye. It's okay.” May approached slowly, “You did it, you can let go now.”

Skye's eyes raised to meet hers, lost and scared.

Melinda could feel her thoughts, twisted with fear and anger. “Calm down.” She said softly. “Let it go.”

Skye gasped, and, after a moment, let the pieces clatter to the floor. She swayed violently, almost collapsing on her face, but May caught her. “You did good.” She said quietly. “Just let it go.”

Skye panted for air, feeling the effects of the staff fade. She couldn't imagine what kind of person would want that.

Her heart sank as she heard footsteps approaching. She knew what it meant. They weren't done yet.

Skye went to reach for the pieces, but May caught her arm. “No.” She said, “Let me.”

Melinda swallowed. “Don't look.” She murmured.

May's hands closed around the pieces, and even she wasn't prepared for the white hot rage it brought on. She looked at as one of her attackers charged at her, raising her arms to fight back. She could feel the humid, muggy air, see the insurgents kidnapping that little girl.

She had to save her.

May easily threw the man aside. Her head pounded. She couldn't do it. She couldn't kill this little girl.

Except she already had.

She ducked and twisted the woman's hits. It was too much, she couldn't keep it all to herself. Melinda wrenched the final piece of the staff from her grip, hearing it clatter to the ground.

Coulson fought to continue keeping Randolph alive, despite the intense feelings of... everything, that Melinda was projecting. It was almost too much. He didn't know how she could handle it.

May grunted when the final piece flew into place, completing the staff. It was potent. It was overwhelming. She could almost see the little girl now. She felt like she did then, lost, afraid, backed into a corner with this choice before her that made it perfectly clear what kind of person she was.

Skye's breath caught in her throat at the feelings May was projecting. She couldn't even stand up. All that self-hatred and anger at the world that she had felt holding the staff was reflected perfectly in May now. Only ten times stronger.

“I am not afraid of you.” Their last assailant said defiantly, and May promptly sent her flying across the room.

She gently let the staff fall back to the floor, looking up at Skye.

She swallowed. “Did you see?” Melinda asked softly, not able to even give Skye a second to gather herself.

Skye shook her head, “No- I-I felt it though.” She took a shuddering breath, “May- I-”

“It's okay,” She said, helping Skye to her feet. “You don't have to say anything.”

Just before May let go of Skye's arm, Skye pulled her into a tight hug. “I'm sorry.” She whispered. “I don't know what happened, but... I know that it sucked.”

Despite everything, Melinda huffed a quiet laugh. “Yeah.” She said, somehow finding it in her to return the hug. “Yours did too.”

Skye drew away before the others arrived. “Yeah.” She said softly. “Don't- don't tell the others I'm so clingy.”

“There are a lot of worse things to be.” May said, not meeting Coulson's eyes as he appeared at the base of the stairs.

Skye continued to block Jemma and Fitz out for the remainder of the night. She could feel them, hovering on the edge of her consciousness, curious and concerned, but she couldn't let them in. She couldn't let them see how useless she really was.

She sat on the couch in the common area. The plane was parked for the night, and even though SHIELD had given them a swanky hotel to stay in, Skye couldn't feel even remotely comfortable there. She liked being on the Bus. It was as close to home as she had.

She sighed, pulling her blanket tighter around herself. It was hard to think straight. She could still feel the staff's effects, like they were under her skin. Like there was something wrong with her. Maybe there was.

Skye heard Coulson approaching long before he actually appeared. “Hey.” He said softly. “Can't sleep?”

She shook her head, and Coulson sat on the other couch. “May can't either. But she's trying to fool me.”

“She doesn't want you to worry.”

He sighed. “Yeah. She's always trying to protect us. She never really wants us to protect her.”

“Maybe she thinks that you can't.” Skye said flatly.

“Maybe, yeah.” He leaned back in his seat in the dark. “I just worry that she doesn't know how much we all care about her.”

Skye swallowed thickly. “She knows.” She said, “You know she does.”

“Sometimes.” He said softly. Coulson paused, looking up at Skye. “I know how you feel you know.”

Skye pulled the blanket around her tighter. “Really angry from holding some alien hate stick?”

“No.” He smiled banefully. “About your cluster. When we were

connected I was suddenly sharing a consciousness with a martial arts master. A mercenary who could disassemble any weapon she laid eyes on. An agent who I'd only heard of by name, who was already running her own division at SHIELD. And me. Some rookie right out of the academy. No special skills, nothing. The others would never admit it, but I was kind of the weak link."

Skye looked down. "And what, you realised that you had *inner worth?*"

Coulson laughed softly. "No. I spent years trying to be better at things, but nothing worked. Then one day we lost two members of our cluster." His face twisted with grief. "Tori was closing off, Melinda was burning herself out, Izzy wanted to take her anger out on someone." He shook his head. "Nothing could pull them out of it. Except me." He sighed. "I talked to them, spent time with them, did my best to fix our connection. Once we were... better, I realised that it wasn't that they wouldn't admit I was the weak link. It was that I was the only one who saw myself that way."

Skye looked down. "Really? You think that I'm on the same level as those two?"

"No, but that's the point!" Coulson said, "Look, I get it. You're in a cluster with two people who had PHD's before they could drink, but do you think either of them could have held that staff for more than a second? They need you Skye, just as much as you need them. Maybe even more."

Skye balled her fists around the blanket. "But what if I'm not good enough?"

"They think that you are." Coulson murmured. "Maybe you should trust your cluster. They know you pretty well."

Chapter 11: Family

“Oh come on, it was totally you.”

Melinda said nothing, keeping her eyes on the horizon. The cream was well hidden in her bunk. She would get rid of it the next time they landed.

“It couldn't have been anyone else!” Skye prodded, “If it was me or Jemma he would have known! And it couldn't be Coulson.”

“Why not?”

“Cos- it just- *it was you!*”

The smile was getting harder and harder to suppress. “Baseless accusations won't get you anywhere in life Skye.”

Skye crossed her arms. “I could just find out you know.”

“But you won't try.”

Skye rolled her eyes. “Well no. I'm not that much of an asshole.” But there was still a layer of uncertainty. She knew that May was secretive to a fault. Skye just wished that she trusted her.

May sighed softly. “It's not personal.”

“I know.”

They sat in silence for a little while, enjoying the quiet, the calm. Everyone was safe.

“Hey,” Skye said softly, “I just wanna say, thanks for training me. I-I know it's not what you really wanted to do, but... well it means a lot to me, so... thank you.”

May paused, looking out over the blackness before them. “Why would you think I didn't want to train you?”

Skye stared, surprised. “I just- I'm not really SHIELD cadet material,” She muttered, “I don't pick things up as fast as I should.”

May raised an eyebrow. “How do you know?” She gave a small smile. “Let Tori rant at you about my trainees if you want. She says I only

ever take the good ones, then take credit for them when it wasn't hard to train them anyway."

Skye was silent, but Melinda could hear her surface emotions. Inadequacy. Guilt. "You're not a charity case Skye." She said firmly. "You're good. Take the damn compliment."

Skye still said nothing. After another moment, Melinda said, "If you try to hug me I'll land you on your ass."

Skye grinned, instead opting to cross her arms to resist the urge. "Thanks." She murmured.

"You're welcome." May liked sitting with Skye. She brought a certain calm that Melinda rarely felt. She hadn't expected Skye to pick up tai chi so easily, but she had. Maybe she needed that peace too. Maybe Skye wasn't the only one adding to it a little.

Skye sat awake on her bunk, scanning through the agent index of those who were active around the time she was born. Not many names came up. Most of them unfamiliar, except a few.

Victoria Hand, Isabelle Hartley, she knew them. Agent Shang, no. John Garrett, Coulson had mentioned him before. Nick Fury. Phillip Coulson. Melinda May.

Skye bit her lip. "Izzy?" She asked softly.

Izzy appeared in an instant. "Hey kid." She said gently. "You're looking a lot better than the last time I saw you."

"Yeah." Skye said quietly. "I- sorry about that."

"It's okay. When Mel picked it up I almost fell over. Good thing I was alone. Tori shouted at an aide, had to send a gift basket to apologise." Skye smiled weakly, but it was clear that something was on her mind. "What's up?"

Skye bit her lip, closing her laptop as Izzy made to sit down next to her. "I- can I ask you a weird question, a-and you promise you won't tell... anyone?"

Izzy raised an eyebrow. "As long as no one's endangered by it." She said carefully. "And the others might find out eventually. I'm not that great at holding things in from them."

Skye said nothing, looking down. Izzy put a hand over hers. “Hey. I'll do anything in my power to keep your secrets Skye, I just want you to know that sometimes I can't.”

“Did May ever have kids?” Skye blurted it out before she could stop herself or second guess it.

Izzy froze. She knew how Melinda had felt about having children. She also knew how abrupt a turnaround there had been after Bahrain. She swallowed. “Why do you ask?”

Skye looked away. “I- just curious, I guess.”

Her defensiveness made Izzy frown, then remember what Coulson had told her about Skye's childhood. Why she was hacking SHIELD in the first place. “Oh.” She said softly. “I- Skye... no. I'm sorry.”

Skye chewed on the inside of her lip. “It's okay.” She mumbled. “I just- I was looking through the files, and I thought... it's stupid.”

“It's not stupid.” Izzy said, pulling her into a one armed hug. “It's normal. Honestly if I were you I'd think that too.” She hesitated. “You should talk to her.”

Skye shook her head. “No, no way.”

Izzy sighed. “She cares about you Skye, she'd want you to tell her. Trust me. I know she doesn't show it, but Mel's got a big heart.”

“She already knows about... everything.”

“Sure,” Izzy said, drawing away, “But I think she'd want to hear it from you.” Skye gnawed on her lip and Izzy took a breath, “Look, she's gonna kill me for telling you, but Mel did *want* kids once. But after... well. Phil told you about Bahrain. Anyway, you're as close to her as anyone. Letting her know that you care about her, admire her, maybe would be totally happy with the idea of her being your mom,” That had Skye clamming up, “That might help her.”

Skye huffed. “Maybe.”

It took Skye three days to take up Izzy's advice. She trained as normal and everything went along as normal. Coulson told her that May was helping look into her family, however, and Skye thought that maybe it was time.

They were doing tai chi together, and had stopped for a water break when Skye spoke up. “I've been looking for my family.” She said abruptly, “But I guess you know that.”

May quirked an eyebrow. Skye was on edge. She had been all morning. It seemed like she had finally popped.

Skye wrung her hands. “I- Coulson said you're helping, so- thank you, for that.”

May's eyes narrowed. That wasn't it. That was stalling for time if anything. “No problem.”

Skye's breath caught in her throat. Melinda could feel the apprehension coming off her in waves. “I- look, for the record, telling you was Izzy's idea, so... it's all her fault.”

“Izzy's ideas tend to blow up in her face.” May said sardonically. She was going for a joke, but judging from Skye's face, it didn't land.

“Oh, okay, don't worry about it then.”

May rolled her eyes. “Skye.”

Skye turned away, kicking her feet. “Look, it's just- it's stupid, and embarrassing, and can you please let it go?”

May sighed. “No.” She said, “Because it's clearly eating you up, and it's going to keep doing that until you just come out with it.”

“I-” As ridiculous as it was, she felt like she might cry. “I- I was looking through old files of agents who were active around the time I was born.” Skye's arms were crossed around her stomach, her eyes fixed on Lola. “Factoring for- you know, age, all that. A-and I...” She pursed her lips, “You guys were all active then, and I started to kind of wonder...” She trailed off. She couldn't say it.

Damnit. She should have seen it coming. Melinda took a hesitant step forwards. “I never had children.”

“I know.” Skye said stuffily. “Izzy said.”

“Sorry to disappoint.” May said softly, sarcastically.

“It's okay.” Skye mumbled. “I just- I don't know. It felt... right. It's stupid.”

“It's not stupid.” Melinda said, “I can't imagine what it would be like to go through what you did growing up, but... I'm proud that you made it, as the person you are.”

Skye snorted. “A- hacking, desperate mess who lies to the only friends she has.”

“Someone who's strong. You fight for what you believe in. You stand up for people.”

Skye sniffed. “You're pretty great too.” She mumbled.

May felt a laugh bubbling up inside, but kept it in. “Okay, that's my quota of nice things for today. Get back on the mats.”

Skye smiled gratefully. “Yessir.”

Chapter 12: The Bridge

“Wait, *more* centipede?” Skye groaned. “I thought we were done with these guys.”

“Apparently not.” May said flatly.

Jemma looked closely at the footage from the jailbreak. “It looks like they've solved their combustion problem! Now they can make their soldiers with no fear of explosion.” Her excitement faded quickly when she caught Skye and Fitz's thoughts.

“Who'd they break out?” Skye asked, leaning over the conference room table.

“Edison Poe.” Coulson said, pulling his file up. “Former marine. Expert on tactics and rapid response. Was incarcerated eighteen months ago for attacking his friend.”

“With a steak knife.” May said sardonically, noting Fitz's averted eyes.

“Tracking him down is top priority.” Coulson said, “That's why we won't be working alone.”

Skye and Fitzsimmons perked up. “Are we gonna be working with Bobbi?” Fitz asked.

“Or Izzy?”

“Agent Hand?”

Coulson shook his head. “Sadly not. The only sensates on this mission are us.”

Skye frowned. “Then who are we working with? Another team?”

“Just one man. One who I think left an impression on all of us.”

“Literally.” May grumbled, rubbing her head as if it still hurt.

Skye grinned. “Mike?”

“Well,” Coulson said, “We might as well fight fire with fire.”

Phil could feel Melinda's annoyance with the situation a mile off. “I

know.” He said, watching Mike approach the plane. “But he just wants another chance to prove himself. Don't you think he deserves that?”

She refused to look at him. “And how much are you going to risk giving him that chance?” May asked. “Our team. Your life?”

“The kids are way less combat ready than Mike. Even Skye doesn't have super strength.”

She shot him a poisonous look. “The kids are our responsibility, Mike isn't. Having him here puts them at risk.”

“So what, it'd be better for him not to be here? You know that would mean Skye going in instead.”

Melinda set her jaw. “If it's an emergency, I can get her out.” She said firmly. “I'm not letting anyone else die because I wouldn't help.”

Phil opened his mouth to reply, but Mike reached them and May walked away. He shook Coulson's hand warmly, “Thank you so much for having me sir.”

“Thanks for joining us.” Coulson said, “We'll be meeting in the briefing room in five.”

He tried to not hurry after May. It didn't really matter anyway. She never wanted to be found after she said something like that.

Skye wasn't sure if she was happy to see Mike again or not. On one hand he was a nice guy, with superpowers. On the other hand he had kidnapped her. She kept polite. Nice. Didn't mention anything about telepathy. She even kept Fitzsimmons in line. It was fine.

She smirked when she felt Jemma's babbling over Mike's physical, and Fitz's reaction. It was kind of cute. Even though she had no idea how Jemma could be oblivious to Fitz's feelings for her.

“Hey,” Coulson's voice interrupted her thoughts. “Feel like going for a ride?”

Skye eyed him nervously. “Only if you promise it's not to the shelter.” She said.

Coulson raised an eyebrow. “No.” He said, “We're going to tell someone that they've won the lottery.”

Skye grinned. “Can I win the lottery too?” She asked, following him to

Lola.

“Maybe when you're older.”

Skye liked driving with Coulson. It felt nice, normal in the middle of their weird lives and team and plane. “She's in a psychology class on the female mind.” She said, tapping at the tablet.

Coulson glanced at her. “That's a class?”

Skye smirked. “Well not everyone shares a mind with three chicks Coulson. You stud.”

He snorted. “Sure. If you want to call me that. Just don't tell the girls.”

Skye laughed. “The *girls,* really?”

Coulson shrugged.

Skye leaned back in her seat, relaxing. “Hey, have you ever... I mean, you and the others.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you asking if I was even involved with a member of my cluster?”

Skye shrugged. “I mean, you and May have that weird *look* sometimes.”

Coulson rolled his eyes. “No.”

“Okay. I was just wondering... how do those kinds of feelings *work* in a cluster?”

“Why do you ask? Are you and Jemma thinking of taking things to the next level?”

Skye spluttered a laugh, “What, no, I just- Fitz, he's clearly got a thing for her, and I don't know- how doesn't she know?”

They stopped at a red light. “Well sometimes people don't see something when it's staring them in the face.” He said softly, staring off into the distance. “Jemma's too close. Maybe she doesn't want to see it. They've always had a great friendship, even before this. Maybe she's scared of losing that.”

He looked like he was on another planet. Skye hesitated. “You sure

you're just talking about Jemma?" She asked carefully as they pulled in to park.

Coulson said nothing except, "Wait here." Walking towards their target.

Skye smiled. "I'm taking that as a no." She muttered.

When he returned to the car, Skye already had the tablet up. "Did she buy it?"

"Of course not." He said, "Who believes a man in a suit telling them they won free money?"

"I'm surprised she even took the card to be honest. Oh, she's making the call to her brother."

"You tracking it?"

"Please. Who do you think you're talking to?"

"The *clairvoyant,* are they joking?"

Skye stifled a laugh. "I mean, I think they meant for it to be... scary?"

Fitz threw up his hands, "Oh, that's just bloody typical, taking credit for someone else's talents. Wouldn't be surprised if they were a bloody ops graduate."

Coulson smirked, pulling the video footage back up. "Fitz, we need an ID on this woman, not a rant about who is and is not clairvoyant."

Fitz grumbled.

"Her name's Raina." They all looked up at Mike's voice.

"You know her?" Skye asked incredulously.

He nodded, entering, "Yeah. She recruited me for centipede. Came to me when I was in hospital. She said she could change my life." He snorted. "I guess she was right."

"Well maybe we can work out a way to thank her if she's in California." Coulson said. "It won't be too long now."

"Great." Mike said, heading to his room. "I'll be ready."

Skye followed him quietly. She waited a moment before knocking on the cage door. “Hey.” She said, gently pushing it open. “You okay?”

Mike looked up, surprised, and smiled. “Fine.” He assured as Skye sat beside him. “Are you?”

Skye frowned. “Why wouldn't I be?”

He shrugged. “I don't know, you just seem... different.”

Skye looked down. “I dunno. I guess I was looking for a place I could fit in.” She smiled. “I never thought it'd be somewhere like SHIELD.”

“Yeah.” He agreed gently. “But it's good.”

“Yeah.” She said softly. “I- really like this team.”

Mike smiled. “Seems like they like you too. Don't let go of that.”

“I won't.” Skye murmured. “How's Ace?”

Mike pulled a picture out of his pocket. “Still with my sister. He's good though, happy.”

“That's great.” Skye said, smiling at the picture. “He's such a cutie. It's gotta be so great to have someone looking up to you. Wanting to be just like you when they grow up.”

“I could do without the growing up.” Mike said quietly. “I feel like I'm missing so much. Who knows how big he'll be the next time I see him?”

“Hey.” Skye put one hand over his. “He knows you love him. At the end of the day that's what's important.”

“I hope so.”

Skye wouldn't go so far as to say that their attack on the warehouse was a total disaster, but she definitely didn't feel good about it. Mike was hurt. May was hurt too, but she wouldn't admit it. And centipede had *forced* people to attack them. Skye couldn't help but feel responsible. A man had died.

“Hey,” Fitz put a hand on her shoulder. “You okay?”

Jemma was patching Mike up across the lab from them. “Yeah.” Skye

said weakly, “Just... well, it's a bit more... real than what we've had to deal with lately.”

“Yeah.” He said, “But we can handle it, right?”

“You know it.” She said, feeling a little better. Skye bit her lip. “I'm gonna go see if I can annoy May into getting checked out.”

Fitz grinned, “Better you than me.”

Skye scoffed, punching him gently on the shoulder. “She's not that bad.”

“Okay.”

“She's *not.”*

“Whatever you say Skye.”

She tried to glare at him as she walked up the stairs. She found May seated at the bar. “Hey.”

May rolled her eyes. “I'm fine Skye.”

“Okay.”

“It's just some bruising.”

“Sure.”

She glared. “Stop it.”

Skye grinned. “I'm not doing anything. Maybe it's your guilty conscience telling you that you should get checked out.”

Melinda sighed. “I'm *fine.”*

Skye dropped the look. “I'm just worried about you. I know it hurt. What's the harm in getting checked out?”

“Trust me.” May said, “I've been hit enough times to know when it's bad. This isn't bad. You've got more important things to worry about.”

“You're important.”

“Oh shut up.”

They both looked up when Mike staggered out of the cage, clinging to

the wall. He was sweaty and pale and looked scared out of his mind.

“Mike!” Skye exclaimed, running to him, “What happened?”

He stared, like he had only just noticed she was there. “They- they have Ace.” He gasped, “Raina, she took him.”

Melinda cursed in Chinese.

“They want to trade, Ace for Mike.”

“Bloody savages.” Fitz muttered.

“They want to experiment on him!” Jemma said, “Determine how he still has his powers.”

“We need backup.” May said grimly, “We can't do this alone.”

“No!” Mike shouted, sobering immediately. “They said they would murder my son.”

Skye's eyes flickered to May at the pang of emotion that elicited. It was... potent. Stronger than anything she'd ever felt come from May before. She didn't say anything. They needed to save Ace.

The road was dark. Skye couldn't help the uneasy feeling in the car. She knew it was spreading across their cluster and amplifying back to her in an anxious loop. She couldn't stop it. She couldn't even talk about it in front of Mike.

Suddenly May was between them at the same time as driving the car. “Calm down.” She said firmly. “This isn't helping.”

“Sorry.” Skye muttered, trying to force her heart rate to cooperate.

“Just not a fan of this situation.” Fitz muttered.

“None of us are.” May said, “But if you're all so worried about it you make a mistake, it'll only get worse.”

“Copy that.” Skye mumbled, straightening out their connection as best she could. She could feel Fitzsimmons helping too, and she did feel a little better.

When the car stopped, Melinda sighed. “At least let me escort him out for the exchange.” She said to Coulson, privately.

He was grim. “He requested me. I'm comfortable with that. Besides, there's not much difference, is there?” He could feel her worry and surreptitiously put one hand on hers. “I'll be careful.”

“I'll be here.”

Mike and Coulson walked out across the bridge slowly, eyes fixed on Raina and her guards. “Lovely night.” Raina said, “I haven't seen you in a long time Mike. I have to thank you for holding up your end of the bargain.”

Coulson forced himself not to get angry. “Let's just make the deal. Give us Ace and you can have him.”

Raina smiled. “Oh,” She said, “That wasn't the deal.”

May felt Coulson's surprise and fear. “Something's wrong.”

She stopped the three of them for going for the doors when Mike grabbed Raina by the throat, watching Coulson talk him down. Melinda knew that he was putting on a calm face, but she could feel the fear bubbling underneath. He was still just Phil underneath it all.

She appeared beside him to watch, to see what was going on. “Phil.”

His head turned, but he made no other motion to indicate he knew she was there. “Let's finish this.” He said to Raina.

She gestured to the guard by the car, who opened the door. Ace immediately ran to his father, getting swept up in his arms.

May frowned when Mike looked at Coulson. “I'm so sorry.” He said, “If there was any other way...”

“You made the only choice you had.” He said softly.

Mike ran back towards the car, Ace in his arms. Just as Melinda tried to seize control of Phil, fight to run away, she grunted. There was a tranquilliser pumping through her bloodstream.

No.

Not hers.

Suddenly she was back in the car, shaking her head to throw off the feeling.

“What happened?!” Skye asked, going for the door, “They took Coulson!”

“Stand down!” May shouted before Skye could run after him, “Do not engage, they'll kill Coulson, Fitz, contact HQ, *now.”*

Skye took Ace as Mike made it back to them. “Ace, I have to make something right, okay? I love you so much. Stay with Skye, you remember her, stay here.” He stood, “Keep him safe!” He cried, running back towards Raina and the car.

A moment later the bridge went up in flames.

Skye screamed, clinging to Ace to keep him from seeing. “Mike!”

Jemma fell backwards from the noise and the heat. “Where's Coulson?”

“Coulson.” Skye breathed, her heart in her throat. When the car exploded a moment later, it was like the ground had given out from under her. *Not again. Not again. Please, God, don't make me do this again.*

Wait, again? Skye focused on her emotions and realised that that wasn't her. That was... She turned and saw the look of utter shock and panic on May's face. *Oh no.*

They all looked up when the helicopter flew past, and Skye was thankful that May's panic faded slightly, giving way to determination and anger.

Someone had taken Coulson, but they were going to get him back.

Chapter 13: The Magical Place

They stayed on the bridge in shock for a solid half hour before even considering going back to the Bus. May looked like she was about to fall over in more ways than one. When she reached for the drivers door, Skye put a hand over hers. “You shouldn't drive.” She said softly. “You can hardly stand.”

May glared, a fire behind her eyes, but Skye stood her ground. “I know you can't, I can feel it.” She swallowed. “It's Coulson, right? He's... out of it.”

“Tranquillised.” She supplied, swaying slightly. “He's- in and out.” May surrendered, climbing into the passengers seat. Fitzsimmons sat on either side of Ace, doing all they could to keep him distracted.

Skye frowned, starting the car. “You can't block it?”

“This *is* me blocking it.” Bile rose in her throat. “It's new. If I didn't know better...”

Skye stared, pulling them away. “You don't think they could know?”

“I don't know how they could.”

“It's possible that it's a side-effect.” Jemma said softly. “But less likely. It would be unnecessarily strong if it's impacting you and the others through Coulson.”

“They can't know.” May said. “The only ones who know about sensates are other sensates. Hard to sell out people who share your thoughts.”

May was proud of how well the kids had gone rounding up Vanchat, to the point that she almost felt better. She couldn't feel him though. Even now.

Tori was on mission with them, Izzy was dropping in. Maria, however, was running it.

Tori found her in the cockpit. “Got anything from him?”

She shook her head.

Tori grimaced. “Me neither. They must still have him under sedation.”

May nodded.

“You had any sleep?”

A glare.

She rolled her eyes. “Mel, you have to rest.”

“Later.”

“Fine. Just eat something.” Tori held out a protein bar.

Melinda snatched it. “Fine.” She grumbled, taking a bite.

Tori raised an eyebrow, but remained silent for a while. Eventually she said, “Your kids are doing well.”

“They're not my kids.”

“You know what I mean.”

“You should say what you mean.”

“You're being stubborn and unreasonable. That's what I mean.”

As always, Tori confronting her was what made Melinda realise she was on the defensive. “Sorry.” She muttered, “Everything's just... we can't lose him again.”

“We won't.” Tori said. “And it wasn't your fault.”

Melinda set her jaw. “I could have stopped him.”

“Sure. So could I. So could Izzy.”

“You weren't there.”

“We're always there. Haven't you accepted that by now?”

Melinda sighed. “Skye needs to be off this plane.”

Tori frowned. “Look, I know you don't like calling them your kids but that seems a little extreme.”

She crushed a piece of the protein bar between her teeth. It felt good to put some force behind something. “She can't find Coulson with all

these agents around. She doesn't work well inside the system."

"You really think she can find him. That one kid who's not even a SHIELD agent."

"She can do it."

Tori nodded. "I believe you. It's just been a long time since you've had that kind of faith in someone."

"She's good."

"I know."

Skye was fighting against her tracker bracelet when May appeared. She looked up at her. May looked tired. She probably did too. Her bunk door was still shut, guarding Skye from any prying eyes. She swallowed. "I can find him."

"I know you can." May said, stepping closer. "But you can't do it here."

Skye felt her heart rate speed up at the words. "Fitzsimmons could-"

"No. They'd get noticed, and then we'd be in an even worse position." May sat down beside her. "Skye, the only way you can do this is if you're off the Bus."

She clenched her hands into fists. "I- how? I'm meant to be on SHIELD's watch list. Hill can't just let me go."

"We've got a car organised. They'll take you somewhere safe before the others even notice you're gone." Skye looked so scared and uncertain that May sighed. "I know you can find him Skye, I trust you to do it."

Skye swallowed. "You promise you're not just trying to get rid of me?" She asked, failing at making it sound like a joke.

Melinda gently eased Skye's thoughts back to normal. "I promise." She said softly. "We'll come back for you, no matter what happens."

She knew that Skye was going to hug her. Even without feeling her emotions that was pretty clear May knew that she couldn't bring herself to push her away.

Skye clung to her tightly, taking a few deep breaths to calm down. This wasn't what she wanted to be. She didn't want to be some clingy kid. She wanted to be an agent. She wanted to find Coulson. She closed her eyes for a moment. “I'll see you soon.”

May nodded. “Soon. You can always find us.”

“I know.”

May let her mind fall back to the cockpit. “Have you gotten anything from him?” She asked Tori.

She shook her head. “No.”

“Me neither.” Izzy grimaced. “He could be anywhere.”

“Skye will find him.”

Izzy smiled. “She's a great kid.”

Melinda snorted. “You going to adopt?”

“I can't,” Izzy shot back, “You beat me to it.”

Before she could retort, all three of them doubled over in pain, clutching their heads.

“Son of a-” Izzy spat when it abetted, “What the hell was that?”

“Phil?” Tori tried to get through. “Do you guys have anything?”

“Only a migraine.” Izzy grunted, rubbing her eyes. “They- they *did* something.”

“How?” Melinda groaned, “How can they even know?” A horrifying thought occurred to her. “What if that's why they took him? Because...”

Izzy set her jaw. “Having a cluster of supersoldiers...”

“Good.” Tori said firmly. “It means they can't kill him. Which means we have time. Phil's tough.”

There was a knock on the cockpit and Izzy vanished. “Agent May, Agent Hand.” Maria Hill said, “We could use you in the briefing room.”

Skye took it as a statement of the gravity of the situation that Jemma wasn't disapproving of Skye's frankly extensive thievery. Or that neither of them were reminding her that she didn't technically have her license.

She stopped the car, trying to work out how to get it back to Rathman's house. She scowled. This would all be so much easier without this stupid bracelet. She was almost tempted to break her hand to get it off, but no. She could get around it. She could get around anything.

Her team believed in her.

Her eyes fell onto the water barrels by the road. Skye swallowed. “Guys, brace yourselves.” She said out loud. “I've just had a really bad idea.”

Fitz appeared behind her. “Skye...”

She floored the pedal before he could say anything.

May jumped slightly at the loud banging and splashing, but she caught herself before she made a more pronounced reaction. She looked to Hill. “Your interrogation isn't working.” She said flatly. “Give me five minutes. And turn off the surveillance.”

Maria raised an eyebrow. “You going to break any laws Agent May?”

“None that you can prove.” She said, walking to the interrogation room. No one endangered Phil on her watch.

Skye caught her breath as the roadside assistance towed her right to Rathman's house. Jemma appeared in the passenger seat. “That was reckless.”

Skye rolled her eyes. “It's fine Jemma. Not like you guys are being super well behaved right now anyway.”

Jemma glared, simultaneously watching Vanchat flailing to avoid being sucked out of the plane. “Well honestly, we're just doing what we need to do to get Coulson back.”

“So am I!”

Jemma sighed. “I suppose you're right.” She said, “Just be careful. None of us want to lose you.”

Skye smiled. “I'm fine. We've all been through worse than this. We'll find Coulson.”

“I know we will.”

It wasn't hard to get into Rathman's house. Nor was it hard to intimidate him. Skye had kind of thought a guy who was in as many shady deals as he was would have a bit more of a spine than demanding to see her badge. Like he was some pissed off customer at a store.

Hell, half the reason she took his car was just because he'd annoyed her.

“Guys?” She said as she sped down the highway. The wind howled in her ears. Belatedly Skye wished she'd stolen the SUV. “I've got a lead on where they might be holding Coulson.”

“Skye?” May appeared in the passenger seat. “What did you find?”

Skye frowned. “What's wrong?” She asked, “You...”

“They're hurting him.” She muttered, wincing, “So they're hurting us too. Where is he?”

“Some abandoned lot out in Arizona.” Skye said, “I'm going there now, you guys can read the coordinates from me, right?”

May nodded. “We'll meet you there, do not engage without backup, understood?”

Skye nodded. “I'll see you soon.”

“Be careful. We're right behind you.”

May shook herself, going back to the Bus. “Skye has him.” She muttered to Tori. “We just need to get there.”

Tori wet her lips. “Izzy's been unofficially running her own mission to find him.” She said, “If she calls Maria with the location Skye gave you, your team could have clearance to go after him with the Bus while the rest of us follow Vanchat's names.”

“Copy that.” Izzy saluted from the Triskellion, dialling Hill's number.

Skye arrived at the lot, and there was an undercurrent unease about the whole thing. The dust bowls. The silence, just that little bit too quiet. The hairs on the back of her neck stuck up.

She was really wishing she'd taken the SUV. Anything that threw up less of a dusty trail. Made less noise on approaching off road. Skye knew that she promised May she'd wait for backup, but technically she *always* had backup. Right?

Skye got out of the car, willing her nerves to go down at the sight of the creepy mannequins and the empty houses. The wind blew her ponytail up. She didn't like this. But Coulson was here somewhere.

“You shouldn't be here.”

Skye turned at the voice, eyes widening. A centipede soldier. Part of her was happy. This meant that Coulson was definitely here.

On the other hand...

She was about to run when Skye found that she couldn't move. No, she could. Her arms just weren't listening to her. Then again, her arms were pretty conclusively beating the crap out of this guy, so she wasn't going to complain too much.

The soldier fell down, unconscious, when she landed a hit to the temple. Skye looked up when she heard the familiar growl of their SHIELD SUV. Relief flooded her senses until May rounded the corner and grabbed her by the collar. “Is *this* waiting for backup?” She growled, dragging Skye along with her.

Skye grinned when she caught sight of Fitzsimmons hurrying after them, Izzy on their tail. “Well I've always got backup. Right?”

May let her go, shoving her. “You know that's not what I meant. Split up. Find him.”

Skye nodded, running for the nearest door. “Coulson!”

She jumped when she felt Jemma duck an attacker, who Izzy promptly nailed in the face with their latest night-night serum. Skye hurried to the next door, hearing the noise from inside.

As she got closer, her stomach dropped.

“Please let me die! Please!”

She ran to the house, May right behind her, and found Raina looking over Coulson, writhing and screaming in whatever kind of torture device they had hooked him up to. Anger boiled her blood.

“It's for his own good.” Raina said, and Skye promptly punched her in the face, knocking her unconscious.

She ran to the controls, pressing buttons randomly in the hopes of shutting it down as Coulson continued to beg for death.

Melinda watched in horror as her partner whimpered and pleaded. Her eyes followed the power lines to the wall, where she immediately ripped them from. Both relaxed when they saw that this caused the machine to power down.

Skye clung to his hand and May sank to the ground. Their proximity brought their connection back somewhat. “Izzy,” She gasped. “We found him. *Don't* come in.”

“Skye,” Coulson gasped, coming back to reality. “Skye.”

May dragged herself over to him, taking his other hand. “Phil.”

“Mel.” He whispered, “Oh thank God.”

They were helping him up when Izzy came in. “It's been two minutes.” She said, “That's long enough.” She pulled Phil into a crushing hug. “God Philly, can you go a few months without almost dying?”

Skye started to smile, the emergency over. “Philly?”

Melinda grinned weakly.

As soon as they made it clear, Coulson was swept away by a med team and some serious looking agents. Skye watched nervously as they took him to the med bay, and May appeared at her shoulder. “Nice jacket.”

Skye looked at her, and her eyes widened when she saw the smirk on her face. She laughed nervously. “I had to scare him a bit is all.”

“Hmm.” Skye couldn't help but get the feeling that May found it funny. Which was kind of a relief. “You found him.”

Skye blushed a little, kicking her feet. “I said I could.”

“Good job.”

Skye smiled bashfully, looking down. She was proud, but she didn't want to act like it. “Thanks.” She muttered.

Coulson watched from the top of the stairs as they took Raina away. She looked to him, but he gave no reaction. Tori and Hill approached up the ramp.

“I've just been on the phone with HQ,” Maria said, “Fury's relieved that you're back.”

He nodded. “I understand you've been busy.”

Maria cocked her head, “Well we've been taking those bastards down, so yeah. Nice plane you've got.”

“You can't have it.” He said flatly, and Tori grinned from behind Maria.

Maria smirked. “Maybe not today.” She said. “It's good to have you back Phil.”

“Thank you.” He extended a hand to shake hers. “For your help.”

“Any time.” Maria said warmly. “We'd hate to lose you.”

Tori remained, and Izzy and the others immediately approached him as the cargo ramp came up. Phil looked at each of them. He didn't have a family, but this was as close as he would ever get. “I just want to say... thank you.” He said, voice rough with suppressed emotion.

Melinda nodded, refusing to be the one to cave and hug him first.

Coulson straightened, “Now get back to work.”

Fitz and Jemma smiled, walking back to the lab. Skye hesitated, wanting to talk to him, but then realised that maybe this was just a moment for their cluster to be together. She followed her own cluster away. She could talk to him later.

Phil watched them go with a smile. “They did good.” He said softly.

A moment later Izzy launched at him, squeezing tightly enough that he grunted through laughter, “Ow- hey, Izzy!”

She grinned, not letting up, “Ugh, you *jerk,* it was my turn to almost die!”

Melinda and Tori stumbled into the hug by no will of their own and Tori sighed. “Izzy goddamnit.”

“Shut up Tori, you're mine.”

May fought valiantly not to smile, but she just couldn't hold it in. Everything was okay. Everyone was safe.

Besides, she was pretty sure the smiling was all Izzy and Skye's fault anyway.

“Sure,” Izzy teased, poking her, “You keep telling yourself that, softie.”

Phil laughed and Melinda buried her head in his chest. This was okay. This was good.

This was home.

Skye was heading to the kitchen for a late night snack when she ran into Coulson again. Or maybe he was waiting for her. It seemed like he was, by how unsurprised he seemed to see her. He smiled, gesturing for her to join him across the small table. “I heard what you did for me.” He said softly, so as not to wake the others. “Thank you, Skye.”

Skye looked down. “Well I couldn't just... I had to help.”

“I know you did.” He murmured. “That's what's most important.” Coulson reached for her arm, gently taking her hand. “I think it's time to take this off.” He brought the bracelet closer to him. “Disengage bracelet.”

Skye stared as it released. “Wait, that's it?”

He grinned. “I thought you'd like that.”

Skye smiled shyly. “Thank you.” She said. “For trusting me. It means a lot.”

“You saved my life.” He murmured.

“Yeah.” Skye said, “But..”

“You're a part of this team Skye.” Coulson said, his eyes going right through her. “You're part of your cluster, and mine. We're not going to

turn our backs. I promise.”

Chapter 14: Seeds

Skye sat in the common area with Fitz and Jemma, grinning down at her hand. “Two aces.” She said softly, placing two cards facedown on the table.

Fitz gave her that lopsided grin he did when he was trying to figure something out. In the end, both were silent. Skye cursed internally. She hoped that they'd take that bait.

The three of the paused when May walked past, clearly heading to Coulson's office. “Is he doing okay?” Skye asked quietly.

May stopped, looking at them. Despite Phil's distress, she smiled. The kids. They were playing *cards* for the love of God. They hadn't even figure out the futility of it yet. “He's... coping.” She said.

“Okay.” Skye said, not pushing for more information.

“Let us know if there's anything we can do.” Jemma said softly.

May nodded, continuing to Coulson's office. She wanted to talk to him in person.

“Come in.” Coulson said before she knocked.

Melinda entered. He was exactly as he was the night before, pouring over the files he had been granted access to not long after they'd gotten him back from medical. “You have to put that away.”

“I can't. You know I can't. You read it. Well, kind of.”

She moved in front of him. “I've read it about fifty times. Because you've read it that many times.” She put one hand over his, over the documents, forcing his eyes to meet hers. “Let if go, Phil.”

He sighed, leaning back in his seat. “I just can't get my head around it. I remember the pain, but- I also remember Tahiti. And-”

“What's in that file,” Melinda interrupted, “It's the truth.”

“Says who?”

She swallowed. “Director Fury.”

Phil gritted his teeth. “That's exactly it. He- he knows about us, he knows that it wouldn't just be me going through that. How could he do that to you guys? How could he risk it?”

“We didn't feel anything.” Melinda said smoothly. “Not until the day before he told me you were alive.”

“But you still felt it.” He could feel Tori and Izzy's memories of that night. “He hurt you.”

“Listen to me.” She said, gripping his shoulders. “Nothing we went through to get you back could be half as terrible as knowing you were gone. Don't make this about us.”

Phil swallowed. “But it *is.”* He murmured. “I- I begged for them to let me die. I wanted them to. I was willing to leave you all, just to make it stop.”

“That's okay Phil.” Tori arrived. “We forgive that. It hurt like a bitch.”

“Yeah.” Izzy said, “And you weren't even connected to us all the way.”

May smiled a little. “See? We don't blame you. So stop beating yourself up. That's my job.”

Phil looked up at her. Melinda. They'd always been close, ever since the early days of their cluster. Something about her just made him feel safe. He stood. “You wanna tell me why we're flying to Mexico?” He felt Tori and Izzy disappear.

May raised an eyebrow, smiling a little. “To get you thinking about something else. I've been keeping an eye on Skye's file, like you said. Did some digging on the agent who dropped her off at the orphanage.” She held out her tablet computer.

“She was killed.” Coulson said, taking it automatically. “Agent Avery.”

“But her partner wasn't.” May said, opening the file. “He disappeared. Just resurfaced in Mexico City. But we don't have much time to intercept.”

Phil nodded slowly. “Does Skye know about this?”

For the first time, May hesitated. “No.” She said. “We don't know what there is to tell her yet. We don't know if it's good news or bad. I don't want to give her false hope.”

“It's not false. Not yet.”

She sighed. “It could be.”

“I know.

Skye glared as she was once again called on an innocuous bluff. “I give up.” She said, throwing her cards down. “I don't know *how* you guys are doing it, but you're cheating. No one can call it that easily.”

Fitz and Jemma looked at each other and grinned. “Skye.” Jemma said, fighting not to laugh. “I don't know how to tell you this, but...”

Fitz sniggered. “We're literally reading your mind.”

Skye stared. “Oh.”

Jemma and Fitz dissolved into laughter, and Skye begrudgingly joined them. She couldn't believe that she'd missed something so obvious. “So this isn't going to work.” She giggled, gesturing to their little set up.

“Maybe not.” Jemma conceded.

Skye shook her head. She couldn't believe they'd gotten her like that. May briefly ducked back in. “We're going to Mexico City.” She said. “Coulson and I have a mission. Classified.”

Skye grimaced, but didn't argue. “We grounded?”

“No.” May said, “Just be careful.”

“That's my middle name.” Skye joked, getting a glare from all three of them. She sighed. “I promise not to get arrested.”

“That's better.” May said, turning to walk away. “Oh, and video games will still work. Or cards against humanity.”

Skye gaped. “*When* have you played cards against humanity?”

May gave no reply, walking back to the cockpit.

Skye grinned. “So, Mexico! You guys wanna hang out?”

Fitz shrugged. “Sure.”

“Sweet. Oh hey, do we speak Spanish?”

Normally sitting in Lola with Phil was a relaxing experience. He was one of the only people May felt comfortable with letting drive, and he was even being less chatty than usual. Which she might have appreciated and used to enjoy the day, but she could feel the paranoia and resentment coming off him like he hadn't showered in a week.

She drew the digital binoculars up to her face. “So. If you were gonna do what this guy did, leave SHIELD. What would you do?”

Phil said nothing. She could feel his surface thoughts, fleetingly imagining how he would do it. Melinda sighed, lowering her binoculars. “I'd hide in the wheel well of a seven forty-seven flight from Newark to Singapore. Back end of the trip passes over a dozen countries. I could drop anywhere.”

She could feel him looking at her, but decided not to stop talking until he stopped her. “You'd probably head to South America. You speak Spanish.”

“So do you, doesn't mean you're heading there.”

“Lima most likely, with the growing food scene.”

Phil sighed. “Why are you doing this? You never talk.”

“Only cos you always do.”

“And you're suddenly interested in the Skye investigation.”

That caused a stab of hurt. “I've been tracking this guy for weeks.” She muttered. “He's good at staying off radar.”

Phil sighed. “You're right, I'm sorry.” He kept his eyes ahead. “I'm just- I don't know what they did to me.”

“They brought you back.”

“Yeah, and what else? Did they mess with our connection? Did they implant something into my brain so now they can see everything we talk about?”

“You're being paranoid.”

“Yes.” He said, “I know, but it's possible. They could have changed

everything." He bit down on his tongue. "They could have changed you, the others."

"They didn't." May said firmly. "I know you, Phil. And I knew you before. Clusters hold themselves together. If they changed any of us, we'd know."

"Maybe."

Skye's eyes lit up at the sight of all the food stalls. May had supplied them each with some currency for lunch, sarcastically telling them not to spend it all at once. "I am gonna eat *everything."*

Skye loved the environment. The crowd, the humidity, the smell in the air, the markets. It made her feel alive.

Fitz groaned, "If you even try you'll burn your face off."

"Oh, you *would* say that. Brits."

Jemma shoved her, "And what is that supposed to mean?"

Skye held up her hands, "I'm just saying, you English people aren't good with spicy food."

"Did you just call me English?"

Skye fought to keep from laughing. "Aren't you?"

Fitz gaped. "I'm *Scottish* Skye!"

"Well it's basically the same thing, right?"

"No!" He exclaimed, looking genuinely upset, and Skye couldn't stop herself from bursting out laughing.

Jemma rolled her eyes and Fitz glared. "That isn't funny." He grumbled, only making her laugh even harder. "It's borderline racist."

Skye snorted and Jemma huffed, "Oh Fitz."

Skye stopped for breath, "Wait, you're serious?"

He crossed his arms. "Scotland is *not* England. You're wilfully insulting me based on where I'm from."

Jemma groaned, and Skye fixed him with a long stare. “I'm going to get a burrito.” She eventually said, not in the mood for explaining to Fitz why he was wrong.

She could feel the two splitting up, making their own way around the various stalls. It was nice. Skye liked being in a crowd. She didn't feel alone, and it made her feel like she was part of something. Of course, now she really was.

Skye ended up grabbing a few different things from some food stalls. She couldn't really communicate with them very well, so she just paid more than she probably should have and got food that she wasn't entirely sure about, but it was good. It was hot, spicy market food that made her feel alive and *may* have burned a hole in her tongue. But hey, that was part of the fun.

She was mostly through her kebab sticks when she found Fitz and Jemma again by a nearby bench, each nursing a cold drink. She cocked her head. They didn't seem to have any food. “Did you guys get something?”

“No,” Jemma said, “I'm not very hungry.”

“Yeah, me neither.” Fitz muttered, wiping his nose.

Skye raised an eyebrow. “Okay.” She shrugged. When she took another bite, Jemma made a soft noise in the back of her throat. Skye swallowed. “Okay seriously, what's up with you guys?”

“'s nothing.” Fitz mumbled.

“Are you seriously upset about the whole England thing?”

“What, no!” Now he looked up, and Skye cocked her head. His eyes were red, and he was wiping his nose.

“Are you *crying?”*

“No!” Fitz yelped defensively, wiping his eyes. “It's not my bloody fault!”

Skye snorted, “Fitz, seriously, just calm down.”

“I'm not crying!”

“Then why are you-” Skye stopped just before she took another bite of her food. “Oh.”

Both of them looked away, and now Skye was scared she might cry. “Guys, come on.” She mumbled, “You could have said.”

Fitz shrugged and Jemma looked up. Her eyes was just as red-rimmed. “You're enjoying yourself though, and you've been through so much lately, we... well we were glad to see you so happy.”

After a moment of not really debating it at all, Skye flung her arms around both of them. “Thanks.” She mumbled.

Fitz paused. “Are *you* crying?”

“No.”

“How have you been doing anyway?”

“Don't change the subject.”

Phil gave her a look. “You haven't said anything in five minutes. We weren't on a subject.” She said nothing. “Come on. I know you don't want to let me in, but we're friends. Things have changed a lot lately with Skye and Fitzsimmons. I just- want to know that you're okay.”

Okay. Phil knew that he had died, and now might lose his mind. They were hunting down one of the only people with answers to Skye's past, and something told her he wasn't going to give them good answers. She opened her mouth to answer, then caught sight of something down the street. “Got him.”

Melinda hurried down a side street to catch Lumley, “He looks like he's heading down the alley.”

She followed as surreptitiously as she could, but it looked like he had caught sight of her and assumed correctly. *Too bad.* She thought. *You can't run now.*

When she arrived at the back street that he had been heading to, May found that Lumley was nowhere to be seen. She looked around and received a heavy kick to the ribs for it as he swung down from a balcony. May grunted, quickly regaining her feet.

It didn't take Lumley long to realise he was outmatched and pull a blue pill from his watch. May's eyes widened and she kicked it out of his hand before he could take it. Skye needed answers, and she wasn't going to let this man take them to his grave.

Unfortunately her distraction gave him the opportunity to seize a wooden palette, slamming it painfully into Melinda's back. She screamed and fell to the ground. As May pushed herself back up, she felt Phil following Lumley in Lola. Hopefully the whole flying car thing made him stop.

“I'm Agent Coulson.” He said, “With SHIELD.”

“Oh thank God.” Lumley sighed. “This is about the baby girl isn't it?”

Skye grinned, solving her dozenth rubiks cube, entertaining some nearby children who liked to mess them up and give them to her. This was fun. She knew it was Fitz's thing, but that didn't matter. She was just kind of borrowing it.

She could feel Jemma looking at some books at a store not far away, and Fitz on the other side of the market looking at those wooden block puzzles. Apparently rubiks cubes weren't hard enough for him any more.

Skye's back straightened as she felt someone slip Fitz's wallet out of his pocket. Without thinking, she snatched it back. “No thanks.” She said, glaring through Fitz's eyes.

The guy scarpered away, and she felt Fitz grin. “Thanks.”

Skye returned to her rubiks cube and the troupe of kids. “You gonna do it?” One asked.

Skye grinned. “Well you know I've got a friend who's even better at these than me. Maybe I'll go find him.” That feeling was back. Like something was wrong. She swallowed. “I'll tell you what, I'll go find him, okay?”

Skye wasn't sure how long she walked when she found herself in a park. It was empty, the grass slightly dry from the sun and humidity. She sat by a tree, trying to breathe like May had been teaching her to. She didn't know what was wrong with her. Maybe it was one of the others having a bad day, and she was just picking up the side-effects. She did suddenly have a sore back.

Skye closed her eyes, taking slow, deep breaths. Her thoughts started to slow, her heartbeat coming under control. She felt calm. Almost sleepy.

When she let her thoughts drift almost into a dream, Skye opened her eyes and found herself somewhere else. Wait, no. She hadn't opened her eyes. She tried to blink but couldn't. She tried to talk but no sound came. She looked around as best she could. A gym. SHIELD, she could tell by the symbols everywhere. At least they were good for something.

A man came through the door. Older, grizzled, stubborn looking. Before he opened his mouth to speak, Skye found herself back in the park.

Was there someone else in their cluster after all?

For some reason that didn't excite her as much as she expected. Just someone else to lose herself to.

“Skye?” Jemma. “Are you alright?”

Skye stretched. “Sure.” She said, “Why wouldn't I be?”

Fitz sat down beside her. “You just felt... odd. We were worried.”

She sighed. “I'm fine guys, I just... I don't know, I'm having a bit of a weird day.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Skye shook her head silently, pulling up some grass. “I... am I still *me?* Now? I- I'm full of you guys. All the stuff you're good at, your feelings... everything. Are we just gonna stop being ourselves and be... us? Just the same person over and over?”

The two looked down. “I don't know.” Fitz said. “It's an odd thought.”

“Well yes,” Jemma acknowledged, “But just because something is made up of the same ingredients doesn't necessarily mean that they're all the same. Ratios change everything. Ethanol is deadly, but in a small enough concentration is drunk for recreational purposes.”

Skye scowled. If they picked up on her annoyance, neither said anything.

“Yeah,” Fitz agreed, “Or like that joke about the chemists walking into a bar and asking for H2O and H2O2.” He sniggered and Skye snapped.

“Can you guys seriously shut up about the science for like two seconds?” She said sharply, “Not *everything* is about science!”

They looked affronted, but Skye didn't care. Jemma cleared her throat. “Well, technically-”

Before she could say anything else Skye stood, walking away. She didn't need this right now.

Skye found herself back at the Bus quickly, without much thought about how she got there. She didn't care. She was angry and annoyed and didn't want to talk to anyone.

“Skye.”

Damnit. “Hey.” She greeted tiredly. At the end of the day she wasn't mad at May, and it wouldn't be fair to take any of it out on her. “You guys finish your mission?”

May nodded, eyes averted. She was keeping something from her about it, but Skye couldn't find the energy to care. “Cool.” She muttered. “I was just gonna- go take a nap or something.”

“What's wrong?”

Skye sighed, leaning against the wall. “I dunno. Relationship troubles with the science twins I guess.”

Despite the heavy knowledge that had just been dumped on her and the heavier bruising along her back, Melinda smiled a little. “You okay?”

She shook her head. “Yeah, I'm good, just... weird.”

“You think you're losing yourself.”

Skye looked up, surprised. She smiled. “That obvious huh?”

May shrugged. “It's normal. You're not, you know.”

Skye sighed. “I guess this whole thing's just freaking me out a bit today. Jemma and Fitz are so tight, and I'm just kind of... there. And I know I'm good at stuff, but- I've always had to hang onto anything that was mine, you know?” She swallowed. “Sharing doesn't really come naturally. It feels like I'm giving away everything that makes me who I am.”

“Think of it more like copying a file. You've still got the original.”

Skye shot her an aggravated look.

“Or.” May murmured. “You're just growing roots here.” Skye looked so confused. It hurt. She had never stayed in one place long enough to bond with people before. “You're connecting with your cluster. You're connecting with us too. Coulson, Izzy, Tori. It's not just the three of you.”

Skye looked down. “You really think that's it? I'm not losing myself, I'm just... bonding?”

Melinda shrugged. “It happens. You can pick up on people's mannerisms just by being around them. Not to say you're not picking up on extra with those two.”

“I'm picking up stuff from you too.” Skye said quietly, “I never used to drink tea.”

“Unenlightened.”

Skye smiled. “Maybe.” She sighed. “I should apologise to them. I kind of snapped for no reason.”

“Not no reason. You were upset. They didn't notice.”

“Still.” Skye said. “I need to talk to them.”

Skye could see the apprehension in May's eyes, see her throat working. Something was up. “Is everything okay? You look like you have something to say.”

May shook herself. “Coulson and I need to talk to you.” She admitted. “But it can wait. You go talk to Fitzsimmons. Get a good night's rest.”

Skye smiled nervously, “You make it sound like I'm gonna die.”

May rolled her eyes. “Don't worry,” She said, “You won't.”

Chapter 15: TRACKS

It was two days later when Skye found herself in Coulson's office, feeling like she was in the principal's office being told off. She looked between the two of them. “Okay seriously, are you guys gonna tell me what this is about? Cos I'm getting worried here.”

May pressed her lips together and Coulson sighed. “Skye, please sit down.”

Skye swallowed nervously. “First you've gotta promise you're not kicking me out.” She tried to make it sound like a joke, but she was pretty sure it ended up more like a plead against the inevitable.

May softened. “I told you.” She said gently.

“Okay.” Skye mumbled, sitting. “Just- hit me with it.”

Coulson sighed. “Well, I agreed to help you find your parents...”

Fitz and Jemma sat on opposite sides of Skye, each with an arm wrapped around her. Skye had her face buried in Fitz's chest, tears creeping from her eyes one by one. How many people had died for her? What was after her? “What am I?”

Jemma leaned closer to her. “You're Skye.” She said softly.

“Yeah.” Fitz agreed. “You're our friend. And we love you.”

Skye sniffled. “Thanks guys.” She muttered, “But I was actually thinking about the science this time.”

Fitz smiled and Jemma gently stroked her fingers through Skye's hair. “The science won't change that we love you.”

The tears came back and Skye squeezed them both tightly. “I love you too.” She mumbled. “I-I this isn't the end. Everything I am... it started here.”

Jemma wove their fingers together. “If you decide you want to try to find out more, whenever that is... well, you know where we are.”

Skye sniffed. “Right here.”

“Always.”

Skye was proud that she'd gotten them such a solid lead. She knew that she was useful to her team. She just liked to be able to prove it. She watched May glare at them in her big fur coat, the coachman dragging her multiple bags and tried not to grin. It was like Coulson was trying to placate her into doing undercover by giving her a role that suited her. Glaring at everyone before ninja jumping onto a moving train. Exactly May's style.

“Focus Skye.” She appeared beside her.

Skye rolled her eyes. “Please. I'll be fine.”

“Only if you focus.”

Skye shook her head. May was such a mother hen sometimes, but she knew that she had her reasons. Skye took it as a sign that she cared. She went back to Fitz, letting him borrow her accent for their cover. This was almost fun.

She easily pickpocketed the guard's keys, and a few minutes later the two tumbled into the side room they had deemed best for surveillance. “You guys good?”

“Yeah.” Coulson said, “Everyone's in position.” He looked to Jemma. “Remember, our target is Carlo-”

“Mancini, yes, I know.” Jemma completed. “Skye's got his file on her computer, I can see it.”

Coulson raised an eyebrow. “Impressive.”

Jemma smiled. “We've been working on our teamwork.”

“Seems like it's paying off.” He said, but frowned when she pulled out the urn and closed her eyes. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, I'm getting into character.” Jemma said politely. “I'm not a very good actress, but I'll do my best.”

Skye smirked, “This is gonna be so sweet.” She sniggered.

“Oh hush,” Fitz muttered, setting up his computer, “She's trying her best.”

“I know, I know.” Skye said, somewhat mollified. “May, you doing okay?”

“Great.” She said sarcastically, “Glad I have the goggles.” Dust blew up in her face, sticking to her lips.

Skye grimaced. “It won't be for long.” She promised, eyeing the surveillance. “Jemma, he's coming your way.”

Despite Fitz telling her not to laugh at Jemma, Skye couldn't help but giggle when she started shrieking hysterically at Coulson about his prostitutes. She saw Fitz grinning despite everything, and decided that she didn't need to feel too bad about it.

Skye swallowed her laughter when she saw the security guy's footsteps moving. “May, he's heading your way.”

“Copy that.” May said, tapping the side of her goggles. “Following him to the package.”

“Great.” Skye said, letting herself see through her eyes. “It'll show as black.”

May's eyes caught sight of it. “Got it. Fourth seat from the back. Coulson, you ready?”

“Already on it.” He muttered, heading to the back of the car.

As Coulson entered the back car, he felt the hair on the back of his neck start to stand up. It was too empty. Too quiet. Something was wrong. “Jemma.” He said softly, ducking back to visit her. “Go find Skye and Fitz. Lock yourselves in until one of us comes to get you.” He jumped violently when he heard the gunshots. “May?”

Melinda pulled the rip cord on her parachute, flying backwards off the train roof.

Coulson's eyes widened when he saw the guards hurrying into the train car. He ran for the back door and dove when he saw the grenade aimed squarely at him. He tumbled out onto the hot dirt, and things suddenly felt a lot more complicated.

“May? What the hell is going on?”

May groaned, pushing herself up. She felt groggy. Stilted. “I don't know.” She said, silencing Skye. “Just stay there until we tell you

otherwise, okay?"

Skye looked down at Jemma's prone body. "I don't know what to do."

"Do as I say." May said firmly. "It's what I'm here for."

Skye swallowed. "Okay."

May caught sight of Coulson lying on the ground and felt her heart stop for a moment. She ran to him, immediately checking his pulse, and breathed a sigh of relief. His face was tinted blue around his eyes, and he was totally stunned, but he was alive.

She looked around. "I've gotta get you somewhere safe." She muttered, running towards the nearby farm.

Skye popped up again as she approached the truck. "Need a hand getting that thing going?"

May gave her a look. "I've been hot-wiring cars since before you were born."

Skye grinned nervously, "Okay, sorry."

May took a moment to ease their connection. "Calm down."

"May behind you-"

Melinda turned and was promptly knocked unconscious.

May woke suddenly.

The first thing she noticed was that she was soaking wet.

The second thing she noticed was that her arms were tied to the ceiling.

The third thing she noticed was that she was totally blocked off from the others. Tori, Izzy, Phil, Skye, even Fitz and Jemma. It was like they were just *gone.*

She glared at Russo. He was spewing some bullshit about how Cybertek would reward her if she sold out her team. It was almost funny how he thought that would happen.

It was *actually* funny that he left the knife in her shoulder. How lax

could they be?

Lax enough not to have any extra security. The only one who escaped her was Russo. The only one she really wanted to get. She ran after him, managing to jump onto his car just before he left. May debated killing him now and stealing the car to find the others, but begrudgingly realised that he could very well lead her to them.

It turned out that she was right, not that she would have driven anywhere else. Phil was off his guard, and Russo had almost drawn his gun when she landed the knife in his back.

Their eyes met, and something felt wrong. Nostalgic, almost. Melinda swallowed. “Get the plane ready.” She said sharply, “I need a shower.”

“Melinda,” Damnit. “What happened? Russo was- explain, please!”

God, how long had it been since he'd had to ask her to explain? May stopped. “Russo sold us out, the train didn't vanish. Get the plane ready.”

He let her go. Neither of them realised that Coulson didn't know how to fly the plane.

May went to the cockpit five minutes later. “Why aren't we flying?”

Coulson grimaced. “Because you're the pilot.” He murmured. “Not me.”

She winced. “God damnit.”

“It's okay. The kids will be fine.”

“You don't know that.” She said sharply, sliding painfully into the pilot's seat. She would stitch herself up after she got them in the air and on autopilot.

She jumped when Phil put his hand on her shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine.” She muttered. “Strap in.”

He sat in the co-pilot's seat, doing as instructed.

He was staring at her. May could feel it the whole time they were taking off, getting to a safe altitude, receiving SHIELD's information on the train's location. After a few minutes she sighed, flicking on autopilot. “What?”

Phil's eyes were wide. “What?”

May tried not to look too annoyed. “You're staring.”

“Sorry.” He muttered, looking to the window. “I just- this is really weird. I- kind of forgot how lonely it was.”

Melinda swallowed. “It'll wear off.” She muttered, then stood, failing to be careful of the knife wound. “I need to stitch this up.”

Coulson also got to his feet. “Let me help.” She glared. “Please. I don't need you self flagellating. And you know you will. You're a terrible nurse.”

He was teasing her, like he always did, and it made her feel a little better. May was starting to feel claustrophobic in her own head. No other thoughts or voices chiming in, no nothing. “Fine.” She said. “But only because you're being clingy.”

It didn't take long for the two of them to see the window that had been rubbed clean from the inside, as if someone were looking at something outside. Cybertek leaving, perhaps.

May jumped up the ladder to the carriage car, grunting at the strain on her knife wound. Coulson followed, the two of them slowly entering the room where Fitz and Skye had been holed up.

It didn't look good. Bullet holes in the computers, and a deathly silence.

May caught his eye and Coulson moved further forwards, gun drawn.

Suddenly there was a noise from up ahead, and a figure stood, shooting wildly. “EVERYONE GET DOWN!” Jemma.

“Simmons stop!” Coulson shouted, making himself visible.

Jemma stopped, lowering the gun. She looked between them, confused. “Where are Fitz and Skye?” She stopped. “Oh God- I can't feel them- tell me they're alive, please.”

“It's okay,” Coulson said, approaching her, “Let me see-” He reached for her face, looking around her eyes. “You got hit by Cybertek's new weapon. It blocks us for some reason.” He gestured to May. “We're the same.”

Jemma sagged in relief. “Oh thank God.”

May stepped forwards. “Do you have any idea where they might have gone?”

She shook her head. “No, I'm sorry.”

“It's okay.” Coulson said, “We can find them. We're glad you're safe.”

Jemma followed them out of the train, looking around at all the people. She seemed very jumpy. May could understand that. She had effectively had all her senses cut down to less than half what they had been for the last few months.

Her and Coulson's phones buzzed in their pockets. Suddenly there was a sick feeling in the back of Melinda's throat. “The tracker's been activated.”

Jemma moved towards her. She seemed scared. Of course she was. “What does that mean?”

May grimaced. “That they've probably done something really stupid.”

Bobbi crouched beside Fitz and Skye, watching the events through their eyes. “Okay, activate your tracker.” She said, “Let them know you're here.”

“Done.” Fitz muttered. “Now what?” He caught the thought in Skye's head, the look in her eye, and swallowed nervously. “You want to go in.”

“We can't let Quinn go again.” Skye said. “If Coulson were here he wouldn't let that happen.”

Bobbi coughed, “Yeah, no, bad idea Skye, you can't just run in there unarmed with no backup. You're gonna get yourself caught, at best.”

Skye scowled. “I can do it.” She said. “And I'm no unarmed, see?” She held up the night night gun she had silently taken from Fitz's bag. “Can you disable their cars?”

Fitz looked between the two of them. “Yeah, but Skye- Bobbi's right, it could be dangerous.”

“Fitz I can *do this*. You know I can. I'm not going to let Quinn get away.”

Izzy appeared. “Kid, look-”

“No!” Skye exclaimed, pushing Bobbi and Izzy back. “I can do this! Let me prove it, damnit!”

Fitz took her hand. “I won't stop you.” He said, “But first you have to calm down. You know what May would say.” He did his best to ease her mind, but there was still that niggling feeling. Nothing from Coulson or May. No trace of Jemma.

Skye closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Okay.” She murmured, shooting him a smile. “Thanks.”

“Good luck. Promise you'll be careful.”

“I promise.” She murmured, “And you too.”

Fitz grinned and ran off towards the Cybertek cars. Skye watched him go, waiting for a moment to help him sneak past the guards before circling the villa to the back entrance. Just the one guard there, who was easily dispatched with the night night gun.

Skye moved quickly and quietly through the house. She heard one of the Cybertek guard chauffeur whatever the hell they were talking about how Quinn's purchase was downstairs. She swallowed. Her throat was dry.

Skye's heart leapt into her throat as she saw the heavily reinforced door that doubtlessly lead to the basement. Every instinct she had said not to go down there, but she was an agent now. Not some scared kid trying to hide from her foster dad, not some helpless baby that needed protecting from the monsters.

The room smelled of dust and alcohol. It felt old, but clean. Skye looked around. Cloths, old wine bottles. The only light came from the small window at the top of the wall, sun creeping past the dust. The case they were tracking sat on the table nearby.

There was an oddly out of place capsule in the corner. Large enough to hold a person. She felt a shiver go down her spine. This felt like some kind of nightmare. Like someone was going to jump out and throw her into this coffin-like prison.

Skye approached it cautiously, and when she saw what was inside, her breathing stopped all together. “Mike.” She breathed, gently touching the glass.

“Hello.” Skye whipped around at the familiarly smug voice. Before she could shoot the night night gun at either of them, the guard twisted it from her grip.

“Skye.” Quinn smiled. “The clairvoyant told me to expect you.”

Fitz watched in horror as Quinn's guard attached the device to Mike's missing leg, as he screamed, watching it grow to fill the purpose of the one he had lost.

He jumped when, a minute later, Mancini was thrown through the window of the villa. Fitz crawled out from under the car. “Skye.” He said, hearing the commotion inside.

Fitz could feel her trying to get something out of Quinn, even as he had a gun pointed right at her. Just as he was about to run in after her, there was the familiar sound of a night night gun firing. He turned and saw Coulson, May, and Jemma hurrying towards him.

“Where's Skye?” Coulson asked.

May concentrated, trying to push through the effects of whatever they had done to them. She smelled dust, felt fear and horror.

BANG.

Fitz screamed in pain and fell to the ground. “Downstairs.” He rasped, “S-she needs help, go.”

He watched them run into the house. “Skye,” He whispered, going to her.

She took his hand, blood seeping through her shirt. “Fitz. I-I'm sorry. I should have-”

“No, don't try to speak.” He said, hearing the gunshots. “The others are coming, just hang on.”

“It hurts though.” She had her back against the wall. “It hurts so much. Fitz- I'm *scared.”*

“It's okay.” He comforted, trying to ease her thoughts through the pain she was projecting. “They're coming, Jemma will make it better, you know she will.”

Skye sniffled, tears filling her eyes. “Fitz- tell the others that I'm sorry,

okay? Tell them that- it's not their fault and... I love them and-"

"No, stop it, you're gonna be fine."

"I can't feel my legs." Skye whispered, hearing the heavy footsteps coming down the stairs and Coulson's shout. "Fitz, please, promise-"

Fitz suddenly found himself back outside. "Skye?" He called, but got no reply. "Skye?"

It was hours later when they found themselves back on the Bus. The effects of the drug had faded, but Skye was still lost to them. "We need to get her to a medical facility as quickly as possible." Jemma said robotically. "We have a few hours at best before she will suffer permanent brain damage. Until then I'll do everything I can to keep her alive."

May couldn't bring herself to look through the glass of the chamber. Skye. Her smart ass kid who always dove in too quickly, always wanted to prove herself. She was bright, she was happy, she was so *alive.* She had no business being in this state.

"Excuse me." Jemma said in a broken voice, swiftly leaving the room. She couldn't do this. She shouldn't have Skye's life in her hands. She couldn't handle this much responsibility. She couldn't have Skye die and have it be all her fault. She couldn't lose Skye. She just couldn't. They were so few already.

Fitz approached from behind, putting one hand on her shoulder. She trembled, turned, and dove into his arms, sobbing violently. It was too much. She couldn't do this. None of them deserved this, least of all Skye.

It wasn't *fair.*

Chapter 16: TAHITI

No matter how many times Melinda had done it before, she would never get used to the feeling of sitting in the waiting room of a medical facility, waiting to hear whether someone she cared about was still alive. It was too quiet, the artificial cold of the air conditioner cut right through her.

It was quiet. The only sound was of Fitz and Jemma shuffling in their seats once in a while, and the ticking of the clock on the wall.

Izzy sat between her and Coulson, Tori on Coulson's other side with a hand on his shoulder. “I'm sorry.” Izzy mumbled. “This is all my fault. I should have stopped her.”

Melinda swallowed thickly. “You tried.” She said. “Don't blame yourself. Blame the man who shot her.”

Tori's eyes fell on Fitz and Jemma. “They shouldn't have to go through this. Not so early.”

“We're not losing her.” Coulson said softly. “It's not an option.”

Izzy and Tori's eyes met. They could both feel the denial coming off the two of them, but neither had the heart to say the obvious. Neither wanted to accept it themselves.

Fitz had started to doze off on Jemma's shoulder when the doctor arrived. The four of them stood slowly, fearfully, hoping that everything would be okay.

Coulson stepped forwards, his heart in his throat. “How is she, doctor?”

The doctor's eyes swept over their faces. “Not good.” She said softly. “The shots perforated her stomach and damaged the large and small intestines. We did everything we could, but... I'm afraid there's been too much damage.”

Jemma felt like she was falling again. Floating, no ground beneath her feet, no world around her at all.

She vaguely heard Coulson ask, “So what's next?” As if there was anything they could do. Jemma knew what this meant.

“We can keep her comfortable.” The doctor said as gently as she could, “But you're going to need to make the decision as to whether to keep her on life support.”

Fitz's hand clutched hers, and Jemma was pretty sure it was the only thing keeping her from collapsing to the ground.

Coulson stared, heart in his throat. “You're saying there's nothing to be done?”

“I'm saying you need to call her family.” He felt sick. “Get them here as soon as possible.”

Phil turned. He saw Melinda, Fitz, Jemma, Izzy and Tori and Bobbi. “We're her family.” He said softly.

“In that case I'm very sorry.”

Blood pounded in Melinda's ears. She was vaguely aware of the others falling into their seats, staggering against walls, trying to comprehend what was happening, what they would have to do now. Not her. She knew exactly what to do now.

She pushed open the door to the cage, and even though she thought she could feel no more furious with the world, seeing Ian Quinn's smug, healthy face certainly proved her wrong. “Finally.” He grinned, “I was starting to think you'd forgotten about-”

Before he could finish speaking, May slammed his face into the table. There was a certain satisfaction in how quickly his smile vanished. “Wait, wait, you can't!”

“Melinda stop!” Tori appeared behind her, “This won't change anything!”

Melinda ignored her. “Why? Because you're defenceless? Like *she* was?”

“Melinda!” Tori tried to seize control of her arms as May punched him repeatedly, blood pouring from Quinn's nose, lacerations and bruises forming quickly. She didn't hit him hard enough to knock him out. She wanted him to feel every moment of it.

“May!” A different voice now, one she couldn't ignore. She stopped, keeping a hold of Quinn's collar. “Outside.” Coulson said, “Now.”

She glared, throwing Quinn to the ground and walked from the room. *"He* deserves to die, not her!"

"Agreed." Coulson said, firmly taking control of their connection, "But right now Quinn doesn't matter, only Skye does, and I need you to fly the plane."

She shook off his attempts to make her calm down. She didn't want to be calm. She *couldn't* be calm. "You heard what the doctors said!"

May couldn't understand how Phil was so matter of fact. "They said there's nothing more they can do for her." He said, "But there are doctors who brought me back from the dead. If they can do that, I'm betting they can save Skye."

Melinda sat in the cockpit, knowing that Coulson was telling Fitzsimmons about how resurrection in the lab downstairs. This could be bad. She didn't know what effect this could have on Skye. Didn't know if this was the right thing to do.

"Melinda, I'm so sorry." Izzy appeared in the co-pilot's seat. "You know, if there's anything I can do..."

She nodded quietly. "I'll let you know."

Izzy pulled her into a brief but tight hug. "It'll be okay." She said, not entirely sure who she was trying to convince.

May nodded silently. "We'll help her."

"You already have." Izzy reminded, leaving.

Melinda sighed, getting to her feet. She made sure that her walls were as high and strong as she could make them before going to her encrypted hardline to Director Fury. If he dared say anything about this not being what it was for, she would kick his ass. Director or not.

She flicked the lock to the door and pulled out the phone. It rang in her ear for a minute before cutting off.

She tried again.

No response.

Melinda cursed. Of course. Never when they needed help.

She put it back, unlocking the door.

This could leave Skye broken, wishing she had died, hating them for bringing her back. And Melinda felt terrible, because despite all that, she would do it anyway. She could bring Skye back because she needed that kid alive and happy.

She hated herself for it, but she needed Skye to be okay.

"SHIELD 616 this is tower Michael Tango, you are in violation of SHIELD directive 1297."

May frowned. Disobeying a direct order? Tori appeared. "You still have Quinn on the plane." She supplied. "You were ordered to hand him over."

Melinda groaned. "Great." She pressed the comms. "This is SHIELD 616, how do we proceed?"

"Prepare to be boarded and relinquish command."

Coulson glared at the ceiling as May came out of the cockpit. "If they scratch our paint I'm gonna be pissed." He muttered.

May rolled her eyes. "Phil. What are we supposed to do here?"

He shrugged. "Talk our way out of it, it'll be fine."

"It will *not* be-"

"Garrett." Melinda stopped, staring at the man climbing down their entry hatch. "What are you doing here?"

Garrett grinned. "Well as opposed to the dynamic duo, I still follow orders."

Melinda rolled her eyes and Coulson smirked. "You're the worst at following orders."

"True." Garrett said, "But I like this one. You're to hand Ian Quinn over for immediate transport to the Fridge."

Another form dropped down the hatch and Melinda was immediately on her guard. As skilled as Garrett was at hand to hand combat, they wouldn't send him without a specialist to back him up. "Antoine Triplett." Garret said, "Agent Phillip Coulson. You wouldn't know it to

look at him, but Phil's one of our best." He nodded towards May, "Though I mostly chalk that up to being linked with the Cavalry."

Both stared, shocked. "Garrett what the hell?" Coulson asked, visiting beside him rather than speaking out loud. "You know we have to stay secret, even within SHIELD."

Garrett shot him a smile. "I took over as Trip's S.O. not too long ago." He said aloud. "Sensate without a cluster. Yet. Medical almost stopped him from going into the field when I was walking by and saw his scans. Can't do crap until his cluster pops up though."

Trip shot them both a nod. "It's an honour to meet you both. Garrett's told me a lot about you."

May raised an unimpressed eyebrow, not saying a word. If they tried to take Quinn, she would fight. Even just for the right to kill him herself. Garrett smirked. "Let's talk." He said, "Instead of just having Agent May here kick your ass Trip. And she would."

"I don't doubt it." Trip said, noting May's stance and expression. He dropped his. "Somewhere I should wait while you guys uh- talk?"

"Here." May said coldly.

Trip held up his hands, "Hey, I just figured you wouldn't want me listening in."

"Won't be a problem." Coulson said, visiting Garrett, feeling May do the same. "Now what the hell is going on? Why are you really here?"

May raised an eyebrow when she saw how Garrett's face changed.

Phil nodded, understanding. "You've been chasing him too."

"Since Malta." Garrett said, "And yesterday your train job cost my team months of work."

"You can't have him." May said firmly.

Garrett looked at her. "Well it's nice to hear your voice again so clear." He said, "And I wasn't asking."

"He shot one of my agents." Phil snapped, "She's on life support in a capsule downstairs. We are taking her to the trauma centre in Bethesda."

Garrett seemed interested. “He actually pulled the trigger?”

Coulson nodded and May looked away. “Skye infiltrated his compound. Seems he took it personally.”

Garrett shook his head. “I never thought he'd have the guts.”

“To shoot an unarmed girl.” May spat.

“To pull the trigger.” He shrugged. “Thought he might be scared to get his hands dirty. I've lost three of mine chasing him.”

“Then you understand why we can't hand him over until we save her.”

“Because if she doesn't make it...”

Coulson nodded.

May was pretty sure that one glance at her would have Quinn spilling his guts. But she understood why Phil didn't want her in there. He could almost definitely sense the vengeful rage still emanating from her.

She knew it wouldn't help though. Rage had it's place, and it was after hope was lost. She walked to the lab. “You wanted to see me?”

Fitzsimmons looked up. “We just got off the phone with the trauma centre in Bethesda, Doctor Streiten is off the grid.”

“So we'll find a different doctor there who operated on Coulson.”

They looked at each other. “That's the thing.” Fitz began.

“Coulson was never treated there,” Jemma said, “The doctors, none of them exist.”

“That doesn't make sense.”

“I know!” Jemma exclaimed, “The room number, the drugs used, none of them are part of SHIELD.”

Before May could respond there was the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs. “Damn, this place is huge.” Trip said, “Thought I'd see if I can lend a hand in here since we don't need any more faces caved in.”

Fitz frowned. “Who the bloody hell is that- Oh *God.”* In the moment that he met Trip's eyes, the two of them stumbled back, clutching their heads. Jemma caught Fitz before he hit the table laden with beakers, and Trip grabbed ahold of the railing of the stairs.

“Damn.” Trip swore, eyes pressed shut, “You could have just said 'no thanks'.”

May looked between them, then took a breath. “Agent Triplett,” She said as calmly as she could, “This is Agents Fitz and Simmons.”

“Great.” Trip muttered, still clutching his head. “Do either of them have any aspirin?”

Jemma seemed to have caught on. “Would you please open your eyes?” She asked politely. “There's a theory I'd like to test.”

Trip did so, squinting at the pain. When his eyes met Jemma's the two of them groaned in further pain. “Oh bloody hell that smarts.”

Trip kept one hand over his eyes. “You wanna tell me what's going on?”

Jemma rubbed her eyes. “I think,” She said, “You're one of us.” She managed to look at him and smile. “Nice to meet you. Sorry it's taken so long.”

Trip laughed, shaking their hands. “It's great to meet you.” He smiled, “I'm not all that sure what I expected, but... shouldn't there be more of us?”

Jemma and Fitz looked at each other and May's stomach dropped. “I'll go tell Coulson.” She said, an excuse to let them talk alone.

Fitz stepped forwards. “You should come with us.” He said softly.

Trip followed the two of them to the med pod. When his eyes fell on the girl in the hospital bed, he understood. “Oh no.” He murmured, gently touching the glass. “I'm sorry.”

“We're going to save her.” Fitz said firmly.

Trip nodded. “What can I do?”

It only took Fitzsimmons twenty minutes to come tearing up the stairs. “We know where to go!” Jemma gasped, “Trip has access to the files

we needed to use and there was an encryption-"

Coulson held up a hand to silence her. "Where do we have to go?"

Fitz followed immediately behind her, "A facility in the Algerian mountains." He panted, "We've managed to get the coordinates off another file, it isn't far."

"Go." Coulson said, "Tell May, get us there as fast as you can."

Fitz nodded. "Yessir."

Melinda flew the plane to the guest house, knowing that finding a way to save Skye could doom her further in the long run. She stayed behind, letting Coulson and Garrett go in with Fitz. She heard the gunshots they dodged, and saw the protocol for the base going up. She held Skye down when she started seizing. She begged whatever higher power there might be to let her live.

She saw the door labelled T.A.H.I.T.I. briefly before Phil blocked her out. She heard Fitz telling her to get the plane off the ground right now.

May pulled the plane up, despite not knowing whether or not Phil had made it on board yet. She went against every instinct she had and took them into the air.

A moment later, Phil was back. The relief she felt was undercut by him shouting at Jemma not to give Skye the serum. It didn't matter anyway. It was done.

May made it into the med pod just after Phil did, struggling to see Skye past the others.

"Come on girl." Trip said, "I still wanna know you."

Jemma smiled. "It's working." She breathed, hardly believing it, "She's stabilising."

As if to make her eat her words, Skye bucked, back arching, choking on the oxygen tube.

Coulson stared as the machines started beeping frantically. "What it is? What's happening?"

Jemma shook her head, trying to hold Skye's still. "Come on." She whispered across their connection. "I don't know if you can hear me

Skye, but please. There's still so much we haven't done together. Fight."

Jemma would never know if her words had worked or not, but a few moments later, Skye sagged in the hospital bed. Her breathing eased. Her heart rate slowed. Jemma swallowed, looking at the monitors. She nodded tearfully. "She's going to be okay."

Garrett crossed his arms. "What the hell just happened?"

Trip gave the faintest hint of a smile. "Girl's a fighter."

Garrett punched him lightly, "You'll get on great then."

May looked to Coulson. "You did it." She said softly. Gratefully. She couldn't have done this. She would have killed Quinn and be done with it. Sometimes Phil's blind hope and determination saved the day.

He glanced at her momentarily, then promptly left the room.

Melinda went to follow, but was caught by Garrett before she could make it far. "How come Trip didn't know he was in their cluster until now?" He asked. "To hear those two talk they've been hooked up for months."

She hesitated. "Their formation was interrupted." May said stiffly. "So it's... complicated."

Garrett raised his eyebrows. "Who's the parent?"

Melinda set her jaw and crossed her arms, refusing to give anything away. Of course it didn't matter. Who cared who the parent was anyway?

Garrett laughed softly. "Right." He said, "Never took you for the type, but sure."

She glared. "Why are you asking questions?"

He shrugged. "Their connection won't work without eye contact, right? Like visiting the others. I'm just trying to think up an excuse for HQ so we can hang around for a few days. I don't know if she'll need to make eye contact with Trip, but better safe than sorry. They could use someone with his skills."

Melinda thought about it, looking through the window at Skye's form. She was breathing. Steady, alive. She had to be grateful for that. "Trip

can stay for a few days if you file a request." She said, "Claim it's to consolidate his training. You don't know crap about martial arts."

Garrett grinned. "You say the sweetest things."

Phil stared at his desk. He could feel Melinda gently pushing, but didn't let her in. He didn't want her to see. He didn't want any of them to see. They didn't deserve it.

There was a knock on his office door. He looked up. "Hey."

"Hey." Melinda said softly. "Do you mind?"

Phil shook his head and she entered, approaching his desk. "You did the impossible today." May said softly. "Saved Skye's life." She paused, taking in his expression, the surface of his emotions. "Why aren't you happy about it?"

Phil swallowed, burying the memory of what he saw. Of the half of an alien body floating in a tube. Hooked up to a hundred machines, draining it's blood. "I just didn't want Skye to go through what I went through." He said honestly. "I didn't want her to suffer like I suffered."

"She didn't." May said softly. "She's okay."

"Yeah. And I'm happy about that, I am. Just-" He winced. "Being down there... it messed with my head. And now she's okay I can't quite believe that we did it. You know?"

"I do." She said, sitting across from him. "But you did. You saved her."

"*We* saved her." Phil corrected, taking her hand and weaving their fingers together. "You saved her too."

She tried to pull away but couldn't. She looked down. "All I did was fly the plane Phil."

"You did more than that." He murmured. "You brought them together. If it wasn't for you we couldn't have saved her at all."

"If it wasn't for me," May corrected, "She never would have gotten hurt in the first place."

"Melinda-"

"Just don't Phil." She pulled away. "I don't want to..." She sighed.

“Just let me feel this way, okay? I can't just pretend this didn't happen. If it wasn't for me she'd be safe.”

“She'd be in her van.” Coulson said. “Alone. Still looking for her family, looking for people who would care about her. She was looking for friends, and you gave her that. Only you.”

Melinda shook her head. That didn't matter. Friends, family, home, none of that mattered when you were dead.

She jumped when arms wrapped around her gently. “She needed you.” Phil said, visiting. He knew she wouldn't let him hug her otherwise. “Just as much as she did any of us. Maybe more.” He hesitated. “And- I think you need her too.”

“Stop it.” May said softly. She knew what he was getting at, and she didn't care. “Just... please.”

“Okay.” He murmured, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “Just... think about it. You didn't curse Skye by bringing her into all of this.”

May really wished that were true. But all she could think about was the warnings about Coulson's procedure. About Skye's body seizing in the hospital bed. The pallor to her face. She thought of everything she had been through, what Coulson and Garrett and all of them had been through, and she wondered if this wasn't a curse after all.

Chapter 17: Recovery

Jemma Simmons sat in the chair by the hospital bed still inside their plane. It had taken a lot of yelling to convince all of the others to go to bed, but they had, eventually. Garrett had taken Ian Quinn to the Fridge in his plane. That was fine. More than fine, actually. None of them wanted to have Ian Quinn on their plane for a moment longer than necessary.

Jemma kept her eyes fixed on the monitors checking Skye's heart, breathing, everything. She needed to make sure she would be okay. She needed Skye to live.

She was so tired.

Skye felt weird. Fuzzy. Sore. Floaty. She opened her eyes and squinted at the light. It was so bright. She took a breath and found that it burned her throat beyond belief. She coughed.

Jemma sat bolt upright. “Skye!”

“Je-” Skye broke off into a coughing fit.

“No, don't try to speak!” Jemma said, hurrying to her and looking at the monitors. “You've been through a lot of trauma and you need to rest. Stay in bed, don't try to talk, I'll get you some water.”

She left before Skye could stop her, but when Jemma returned it was to note the tears swimming in Skye's eyes. “Oh dear, are the painkillers not strong enough? It's okay Skye, I can help.”

Before she could touch any of the IV's Skye was hooked up to, Skye weakly grabbed at her hand. Jemma hesitated, then started to feel Skye's emotions through the haze of drugs. Fear. Sadness. Desperation.

Basically just 'needing a hug'. Jemma sighed, putting down the water. “I'm so glad you're okay.” She murmured, carefully wrapping her arms around Skye's weak form. Jemma tried to be as gentle as she could, mindful of Skye's injuries, but the intensity with which Skye clung to her was frankly impressive.

It wasn't until that moment that Jemma had really accepted that Skye was going to be okay. She felt tears well up behind her own eyes and fought to keep them back. Skye was okay. She was here. Jemma

sniffled. “We were so scared.” She whispered. “I- we're so glad you're okay.”

Skye said nothing, just hugged Jemma as tightly as she could. It was coming back to her now. The mission, the villa. Ian Quinn.

“I'm sorry.” Skye mumbled, momentarily forgetting about Jemma's insistence that she not talk.

“It's okay.” Jemma said, feeling Skye's memories coming back to her. She pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “I'm here. We're all here. You're safe.”

When she tried to pull away Skye only held on tighter. “Don't go.” She whispered.

Jemma smiled. “I won't.” She promised. “But I need to check your vitals. Please?”

Skye made an unhappy sound in the back of her throat, but let go. When she did, she was immediately hit with a wave of fatigue. “J-Jemma?”

“It's okay.” Jemma said softly, stroking her hair. “You can sleep. I promise, I'm not going anywhere.”

She continued to drag her fingers through Skye's hair until she felt her mind ease into sleep. Jemma smiled gently, double checking that her painkillers were at an adequate level.

Just as she was finishing with that, Fitz stumbled through the door, ruffled, still in his pyjamas. “S-Skye's awake.” He said, “I- I felt it.”

“She was.” Jemma admitted, looking to her. “Just for a minute.”

“Oh.” Fitz shuffled his feet. “I guess I should...”

Jemma smiled. “You can stay.” She said gently. “She didn't want to be alone. I think she'd want you to be here.”

“Well I would have been,” Fitz grumbled, “But *someone* made the rest of us go to bed.”

Jemma rolled her eyes. “Because you were all exhausted Fitz! There wasn't much need for it.”

“I was just worried about her.” Fitz said, looking down at Skye's

peaceful face.

“I know.” Jemma murmured, “But I was worried about both of you. You needed rest.”

Fitz swallowed. “You need rest too.” He said, “I can stay with her, I've got all your stuff up here, remember?” He tapped his head.

Jemma smiled. “Thank you Fitz, that's sweet, but I promised her I wouldn't leave.”

He shrugged. “So don't. Have a nap in the chair and I'll keep an eye on her. I know you're tired.”

Jemma grimaced. “I- okay.” She surrendered. “Promise you'll wake me if anything happens.”

Fitz grinned. “I promise.”

When Jemma woke, it was to see Fitz curled up beside Skye on the bed. Her arms were wrapped around him, her head resting on his chest. She smiled, for once not feeling the need to make a fuss. Fitz noticed her watching them. He grimaced. “She woke up while you were asleep.” He said softly. “She just kept reaching at me until I'd give her a hug, then she wouldn't let go.”

“I know.” Jemma murmured. “She was doing the same earlier. I think the drugs just make her a little clingy.”

“Please.” Fitz smiled, “Being Skye makes her clingy.”

Jemma grinned. “True.” She admitted. “But the drugs make her honest about it.” She stretched. “What time is it?”

“About six.” Fitz said, looking at his watch. “The others should be up soon.”

“May's usually up by now.” Jemma said, “I'm surprised that she didn't feel Skye waking up.”

Fitz shrugged. “She's probably just exhausted. You didn't wake up when Skye did. I was just already awake.”

Before Jemma could reply, there was a soft knock on the door. Both looked up. “Sir.” Fitz muttered, trying and failing to get Skye to let go of him. “I- uuh.”

Coulson made no comment on their situation. “She wake up?” He asked softly.

Jemma nodded. “Yes sir, twice so far. She's been fairly cogent.”

“Good.” He nodded, then paused. “Do either of you need anything? Breakfast?”

The two looked at each other. “I'd like some toast if that's okay, sir.” Jemma admitted, and Coulson smiled.

“No problem.” He winked. “I'll make your tea too.” He stopped. “The tea drinkers outnumber us on this plane.” He said, walking to the kitchen. “What has the world come to?”

He brought Fitzsimmons their tea and toast, then ventured down to the gym, following the sounds of punches. Phil looked down at May and Trip sparring with a smile. He liked watching Melinda spar, he always had. There was an energy to her. Lately it had been the only time she seemed really *alive.*

Trip laughed when she landed him on his back. “Damn. You really know what you're doing.”

“Comes with time.” Melinda said, giving him a hand back up.

“Not from any of your buddies?” Trip probed. “Can't hurt, right?”

Coulson laughed. “No, she gets my charm instead.” May glared and Trip grinned. “I think something went wrong there.”

Melinda raised an eyebrow. “You want to show Trip how it's done?” She challenged. “I think he needs a break.”

“Oh, no, I wouldn't want to embarrass you.” Phil grinned. “We both know how badly that could end for you.”

May rolled her eyes and Trip chuckled. “How's Skye?” He asked, “Has she woken up?”

Coulson nodded. “She's asleep now though. She'll be in and out, you'll meet her eventually.”

May grabbed a towel. “I need breakfast.” She said, “We'll continue later.”

Trip smiled easily. “What, haven't you done enough damage?”

“Not even close.”

Coulson finally caught up when her when May peered around the corner to see if Skye was awake. “You could just go in you know.” He said, almost making her jump. “She'd want to see you.”

Melinda shook her head quietly. “I can't.” She murmured. “I just-can't.”

He put a hand on her shoulder, sensing her fragility. “Hey, why not? You know it's not your fault.”

“She's only here because of me.”

“Me too.” Phil said softly. “I'm the one who invited her onto the team.”

“You're avoiding her too.”

“Yes.” He admitted. “You think we should go in together?”

“No.”

“Come on.” He tugged gently at her arm. “I know you care about her, and she's not even awake right now. Just... come on.”

Despite her apprehension, May let herself be pulled into the room. Fitz had gone to monitor Garrett's travel to the Fridge, so only Jemma remained. She smiled. “Hello.”

May managed a slight smile. Jemma was always so formal. “How is she?”

“Recovering rapidly.” Jemma supplied. “It's quite remarkable actually, I'd like to do some analyses of her blood to find out how this is occurring.” Their unease must have shown, because Jemma immediately followed that by saying, “Once Skye has recovered, of course.”

Both took a seat and Jemma hesitated. “How long do you think we should wait before we introduce her to Trip? Does this sort of thing... could if effect her recovery?”

May and Coulson shared a look. “It shouldn't.” Coulson said. “But maybe we should wait until she's off her painkillers and a little more cogent. It's a lot to handle.”

Jemma nodded. “Of course sir. Should we tell her about him?”

He shrugged. “Sure. I don't see any reason why not.”

Melinda sensed Skye starting to stir and stood. “I should go.” She said, quickly leaving the room.

Phil frowned. “Melinda-”

“Hey.” A croaky, soft voice greeted him, and Coulson looked back around.

“Skye.”

“Hi.” She greeted weakly. “Good to see you.”

He smiled. “You too.” He said, struggling not to tear up. “You scared us.” Jemma quietly left, giving them a moment.

Skye looked down. “Sorry.”

“It's okay.” Coulson said, standing to move closer, “It wasn't your fault. We're just- happy you're safe.”

Skye sniffled. “I'm sorry I went in alone.” She mumbled. “It was stupid.”

“Some would say it was brave.” He said gently.

Skye shrugged. “Same thing.” She muttered.

Her self flagellation was too much for him to handle, and Phil immediately pulled her into a hug. “You did your best.” He murmured. “We're the ones who should have been there. We're the ones who failed you, not the other way around.”

Skye gasped for air, clinging to him in return. “You saved me.” She said, “I thought I was gonna die, but you saved me.”

“It wasn't just me.”

“I know.” Skye mumbled into his jacket. “I just- I've never had anyone who would do that for me.” She trembled. “Thank you.”

Oh Skye. “We'd do it again.” He promised, and was surprised to find that he meant it. Even with all of the uncertainty and possible peril ahead of them. Skye was alive. “A hundred times.”

“Stop.” She commanded. “You're gonna make me cry.”

Coulson smiled. “Sorry.” He said softly. “You want me to say something mean so you can be mad instead?”

Skye laughed, then quickly stopped when the pain wracked her torso. “Ow.” She muttered.

“Sorry.”

Skye couldn't keep track of time very well. Or at all. Between the haze of drugs, muddying her connection to the others, the lack of windows or electronics, and how sporadically she had been sleeping, she was never really sure what time of day it was. Or what day.

She woke up every now and then. Sometimes to food. Sometimes to company. Sometimes to both. Once to neither.

Skye was pretty sure it was night time when she woke up and there was someone she didn't recognise sitting by her bed. “... Hi?” She said, bemused.

Trip kept his eyes on the floor. He wasn't really meant to be there. Fitz and Jemma wanted him to wait before meeting Skye, until she had recovered, at least a little. He didn't mean for her to wake up. He was just curious about her. “Hey.” He said smiling. Despite all of that, he couldn't say he was disappointed.

Skye frowned. “Uuh, I don't wanna be rude, but who the hell are you?”

He laughed. “I'm Trip. Me and my S.O. came along to help your team find your magic cure.”

“Oh.” Skye coughed dryly. “I- thanks.”

“No problem.” Trip smiled. “Coulson and Garrett go way back from what I've heard.”

Garrett. That name sounded familiar. “John Garrett?” The guy who lost his whole cluster?

“Yeah. He and Coulson had the same S.O. when they were cadets. Stuff sticks I guess.”

Skye nodded, still finding it odd that this guy hadn't looked at her.

“That's cool. Coulson hasn't talked about him a lot. What's he like as an S.O.?”

Trip shrugged. “Not all that hands on. Likes to let me do my own thing, but he'll kick my ass if it needs kicking.” He grinned. “Guess you and me have that in common with our S.O's.”

Skye stared for a moment, then grinned, realising that he knew May was training her. “I don't know.” She said, “May kind of kicks my ass whether it needs it or not.”

Trip laughed. “Yeah, I've noticed that.” He said, “But hey, she gets results. As long as the constant ass kicking doesn't make you hate her and quit.”

“Nah.” Skye said, “That wouldn't happen. She's cool.”

“Yep.” Trip grinned.

Skye hesitated. “I- uh, was just kind of wondering... why won't you look at me?”

Trip grimaced. “It's kind of a long story... well, not really, more of a secret.”

Skye swallowed. “The others are keeping secrets from me?” That... kind of hurt. Now she knew how they felt when they found out about Miles.

Trip groaned. “No, it's- it's complicated. We wanna tell you, they just think you need to be stronger, and-” He huffed. “Screw it. Those two are too careful anyway.”

Trip looked up, meeting her eyes for the first time, and Skye immediately recoiled at the shock. When the headache hit and she felt the connection snap into place, she smiled unbelievably widely. “Oh.” She breathed, then practically started bouncing. “It's *you!* Oh my God, I saw you once when I was meditating! Well, kind of, I mostly saw what you were seeing, holy crap this is awesome, *hi!”*

Trip laughed through the pain. “Hi.” He greeted. He liked this girl. He could feel her energy and enthusiasm, even muted through the fresh connection and her drugs. “Nice to meet you.”

Skye beamed.

The haze of drugs had finally started to wear off from Skye's connection, and it was that which finally made May visit her. Actually going into the room was something she had done before, but not when Skye was awake.

It was necessary now though. She knew that Jemma, Fitz and Trip thought she was recovering fine. She also knew a lot more about a sensate connection than them. It came with experience.

Skye wasn't facing her when she approached the door. Melinda stopped, looking in at her. Skye still looked so small. She took a breath. “You're in pain.” She said.

Skye jumped at the unexpected intrusion, but brightened when she saw that it was May. She stammered when she realised what she had said. “I-I mean, kind of, not really though, you can feel it right? It's not that bad. I can take it.”

May raised an eyebrow, walking in. “What I can feel is you trying to hold it in. That's why you won't ask Jemma for more painkillers. You know she'll ask questions.”

Skye said nothing, just stared at her. After a moment, Melinda sighed. “What?”

Skye bit her lip. “Just... you're okay.”

She frowned. “Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?”

She shrugged. “I dunno, I just- Coulson jumped off the train and disappeared, and then you got captured and you disappeared. I guess I was kind of scared...”

Oh. “I'm- fine.”

“I know.” Skye murmured. “I just- I hadn't seen you since, and I kind of... don't worry about it.”

God, this kid could not be telegraphing for a hug more clearly if she used Izzy's trick of pulling her into it. Melinda put one hand over hers. “I'm fine.” She said again. “You're fine. Everyone's fine, so try to relax, okay? Tell Jemma you need more painkillers.”

Skye swallowed. “I can't hurt them.” She murmured. “I just can't.”

“I know.” Melinda said, “I can't make you. I wouldn't either.”

“Really?”

She raised an eyebrow. “How do you think I knew what you were doing?”

Izzy popped up beside her. “Mom sense.” She teased. Melinda rolled her eyes, but was glad that Skye hadn't heard. Izzy had that sense at least.

Skye wove their fingers together. “I'll tell her.” She said, “As long as you tell me why you've been avoiding me.” She wasn't sure what had made her so bold. She had just missed May.

Melinda sighed, “Skye-” She didn't want to say it. She didn't want to admit that this was all her fault. That anything that happened now would be her fault too. The only reason she was here at all was because Skye was holding all her pain in.

The guilt was suddenly potent, and Skye tightened her grip on May's hand. “It wasn't your fault.” She murmured.

May looked down, failing to pull her hand free. She wasn't used to someone knowing how she was feeling. It had been years since she had let any of the others get this close. Usually she would distance herself from them. But Skye was in pain, and maybe that was more important than her. “I opened your connection.” She murmured. “Made you sensate. Let Coulson bring you on the plane.” She took a breath. “I'm your S.O. I'm meant to protect you.”

Skye tried and failed to catch her eyes. “That doesn't make it your fault.” She said. She hesitated, then mumbled, “Come here.”

Melinda frowned, then saw the look on her face. “No- Skye...”

Skye turned the puppy eyes up to eleven. “Everyone else gave me a hug.” She said sadly. “Are you mad at me?”

Manipulative little shit. “No.” She said, “But if all of the others did then you obviously don't need me to.”

Skye tried desperately not to smile. She loved their mutual mockery and teasing. “I do though, Simmons said hugs are the only thing that will heal me.”

“Liar.”

“May, if you don't do this I might never walk again.”

“That is a pile of-” May broke off with a yelp when she felt a shove to the middle of her back. While she knew that no one had actually pushed her, she also knew that if caught off guard, the effect was the same.

Skye laughed, triumphantly pulling May into a crushing hug. Izzy grinned at her, shooting her a smug salute before disappearing.

Melinda sighed. “I knew you two meeting was a bad idea.”

Skye laughed softly. “I think it was a great idea.” She said. “Meeting all of you was a great idea.”

May softened, gently returning the hug. “Yeah.” She said gently.

Skye grinned. “I knew you were a softie.”

“Am not.”

“Sure.”

Skye wasn't sure how long it had been when she heard Coulson approaching. May had kicked off her boots and was sitting beside her on the bed, letting Skye cuddle up to her side.

Phil smiled for a moment at the sight of them, then remembered the reason he had for coming down. “We've got a problem.” He said to May. “Garrett didn't make it to the Fridge.”

Skye felt panic start to grow and her wounds start to throb. “And neither did Quinn.” She realised.

May's arms tightened protectively around her.

Chapter 18: Turn Turn Turn

“How could he just disappear like that?!”

“Maybe he was taken. The clairvoyant could have intercepted his plane, it's the best we've got.”

“No one can reach him?”

“If anyone could this wouldn't be an issue, would it?”

May could sense Skye's unease. She tried to calm her via their connection. She'd never been good at that though. “You can't get through to him, right?”

Skye shook her head. “I can barely get through to anyone to be honest.” She said, “Drugs are wearing off though.”

Despite Jemma's protestations, Skye had joined the team and Trip in the conference room to talk to the others. Bobbi, Izzy, and Tori were visiting.

Tori shot Bobbi a look. “No one in your cluster can reach him? Or have they just not tried?”

Bobbi bristled. “I can't *make* them do anything.” She said, “And this is kind of why they wanna stay as secret as they can.”

Skye swallowed. “Garrett's the one you told me about, right?” She said to Coulson. “He- he lost his whole cluster.”

Coulson nodded sadly. “At once. They were on a mission and got ambushed. Only Garrett survived.”

Izzy looked grim. “We thought he was gonna go crazy for a while.” She said, “But... well eventually he just kept going. He was different, sure, but still Garrett.”

Skye's pulse quickened as a sickening thought occurred to her. Fitzsimmons and Trip glanced at her, but she shook her head. She didn't want to entertain the idea. Not right now. “So we think the clairvoyant's taken them?”

Tori grimaced. “Well whoever the clairvoyant is, they have some kind

of abilities. Maybe they saw Quinn and took the opportunity to intercept. His assets are mostly frozen, but..."

"You can never get all of them." Skye said. "He's got tons of offshore accounts under assumed names." She caught the looks they were giving her and shrugged. "What? I've gotta kill time somehow if I'm stuck in a hospital bed."

Jemma shook her head fondly. "So how can we track him if we can't visit?"

"I'm at the Triskelion." Tori said, "I can run some scans from here. You can use your plane, try to track the course he was taking."

Jemma jumped on the opportunity. "I could go to the Hub." She offered. "There are some labs there that could assist, I'm sure we have something around here that he touched which we could use to track him."

Izzy frowned. "What, you've got a bloodhound?"

"Um, yes, sort of." Fitz said, "It's one of the dwarves, it can track some scents. It would at least give us a start."

Izzy whistled, impressed. "Can I swap teams?"

May rolled her eyes and Coulson laughed. "I think they're good."

"Very good." Izzy grinned. "Especially for a half pint."

"And what is *that* supposed to mean?"

Fitz watched quietly as Jemma packed up her equipment for her trip the to Hub. "You gonna run Skye's blood samples?"

She looked up. "Well yes."

He nodded. "Does she know?"

"No." Jemma said. "I think she's still hazy, which is understandable. And good timing, because if she knew then Agent May could know, and then Agent Coulson would know too."

Fitz smiled. "Hard to keep secrets."

Jemma sighed. "I don't like to." She admitted. "But I don't think they

understand how much this drug could help people if we could just figure out how it works."

"Maybe that's the problem." Trip said from the doorway to the lab, surprising them. "Maybe *we're* the ones who don't understand." When the both stared, he laughed. "You two aren't used to hearing that, huh?"

Fitz shook himself first. "Well we're quite smart."

"I noticed." Trip grinned. "Way to make a man feel inadequate."

Jemma rolled her eyes. "Well we're very sorry for that." She muttered sarcastically. "You can fly a plane though. Neither of us can do that."

"Yeah, and I can't show you my PHD." Trip teased.

Fitz smiled. "Well at least now you and Skye can start a club. We'll have to split up on game nights."

"Please, that girl will win poker any time. I know the type."

Jemma sighed. "I hope she's okay." She murmured, carefully placing the blood samples into her case. "Finding out that Quinn got away... that can't be easy."

"It's okay." Fitz assured. "I'll stay with her."

"I know." She murmured. "I just worry."

"I'd noticed, actually." Fitz teased, and Trip grinned.

Fitz ducked his head into Skye's room. "Hey." He said, "Jemma let you out?"

Skye looked up from her laptop and grinned. "Not exactly." She said, "But she's not here, is she?"

Fitz bit back a laugh. "She's mad at you now." He could feel Jemma's irritation.

Skye shrugged. "I can deal with that if I don't have to deal with the lumpy hospital bed and being stabbed by needles all the time."

She shifted over when Fitz sat down beside her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "You okay?"

Skye sighed, leaning against him. “Yeah. I just- I can't believe he got away.”

“He can't hurt you now.” Fitz murmured. “You're here. You're safe.”

“I'm not scared.”

“Yes you are.” He could feel it. “It's okay.”

Skye shuddered. “I-I don't wanna be scared.” She said. “There are four of us and one of him and we can keep each other safe, but... I still have nightmares about him coming.” She looked down. “He- he kills all of you, and I have to watch. I can feel it, I feel all of you die, and then- he comes for me.”

Fitz pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “We're all here.” He said. “He can't get us.” He hesitated. “You know that May basically caved his face in, right?”

Skye looked up. “What?”

He laughed softly. “Well she was angry. And you know how protective she can get.”

“Well yeah, but...” Skye paused. “Did she really?”

“Yeah.” Fitz said. “He didn't look very good after. And it was only about a minute. Coulson basically had to pull her off him.”

“They didn't mention it.” Skye mumbled, then hugged him back tightly. “Thanks for telling me.”

“Any time.” Fitz said. “You can tell us. If you have those nightmares, you can tell us. We want to help Skye.”

She sighed into his shoulder. “I'm not good at that.” Skye said quietly. “I-I've always had to do everything for myself.”

“I know.” Fitz murmured. “But you have us now. Let us help you.”

Skye swallowed. “I'll try.”

“Thank you.”

Skye was nervous. Part of her didn't want to share her theory with Coulson. It had disturbing implications. It could be insulting to him,

even. She didn't want to be the one to say it, but it did need to be said.

She knocked gently on his office door.

Coulson looked up. “Hey,” He smiled. “Good to see you walking around.”

Suddenly she felt awkward. “I was walking around earlier.” She muttered at her feet.

Phil shrugged. “Well yeah, but it wasn't really the time to talk about it.” He waved her in. “Have you found something?”

Skye swallowed, hugging her laptop to her chest. “No. I've got a program running that's tracking Garrett's plane though.”

Coulson cocked his head. She was nervous about something. “What is it?”

Skye shifted. “I- was just thinking about the clairvoyant.” She said, taking a seat opposite Coulson. “And- something about it doesn't add up.”

“You have a theory?”

Skye bit her lip. “I... the clairvoyant knows things. Things that they shouldn't be able to know, where we were at the villa, how to get you at the bridge. But- they can't know everything, or they wouldn't have-”

“Shot you?”

“I was gonna say kidnapped *you,* but whatever.”

It might have been funny but for the circumstances. Coulson leaned back in his chair. “What's your idea?”

Skye looked down. “I was just thinking... what if they're sensate?”

“What are you trying to say Skye?”

She swallowed. All in now. “Well- if they saw any of us, they'd be able to visit, but we might not be able to know if they're there, just kind of... out of sight. And you can't try to visit everyone you look at, so we wouldn't know. And they know a lot about us, sir, but... not more than we do. The clairvoyant only really sees what's happening, so I thought...”

Coulson steeped his fingers. “It's a disturbing thought.” He admitted. “But clusters tend to keep each other in check.”

“Not if they're the only one left. Like Garrett. You guys were saying you were scared he'd go crazy, what if this person did? What if they didn't have anyone left to lean on like Garrett had you guys? Or if they could hide it, bury it under other thoughts, block out their cluster.”

“It's possible.” Coulson muttered. “I'll see if someone can get through to Peggy.” When Skye looked confused, he elaborated. “Our parent. She's hard to talk to these days, but she might know something that could help us find this person.”

Skye shifted. “You don't think I'm being paranoid?”

“Oh you're absolutely being paranoid.” Coulson said, “But that doesn't mean you're wrong.”

“I don't like this.” Skye muttered. “I- I don't *want* to be right.”

“I don't really want you to be either.” He sighed. “But we can't just pretend that it doesn't make sense. We have to know.”

“Thanks for listening to me.” Skye mumbled.

Coulson smiled, even though he didn't feel it. “Thanks for telling me.”

Fitz had, in his relatively short time as a sensate, become quite good at blocking the others out when he wanted to. They could still visit though, so he supposed that word wasn't really accurate. He just needed quiet sometimes. He needed his time by himself without all their sights and smells and feelings overwhelming him. He loved Skye and Jemma, and he was coming around to Trip, but it all got to be so *much* sometimes. He needed space to think. Even from Jemma.

Which was exactly what he had now, as he combed the plane for anything Garrett had touched. Skye was still a little hazy from her medication, and Trip and Jemma were on their way to the Hub to meet Tori, try to track Garrett's plane from there, and, only known to them, run Skye's blood samples. This was still important. Agent missing or no, the GH 325 could save countless lives.

The more he thought about it, the more Garrett's disappearance bugged him. How could someone take a whole plane without them

noticing? How could they make it so that all of SHIELD's tracking, any satellite feed, radar, sonar, all of that was not enough to find where it had gone?

It didn't make sense. No one could just vanish like that, even someone who was supposedly psychic.

Well. More psychic than them.

Fitz frowned as a thought occurred to him. “Trip,” He asked, “Did your plane have a comm link to the Bus when you got here?”

Trip looked up from Garrett's file at the Hub. “Yeah.” He said, “They used it to threaten to blow you guys out of the air.”

“Charming.” Fitz muttered. “Thanks.”

“No problem man.” Trip muttered, “Still getting used to this thing. It's weird.”

Fitz smiled. “Don't worry, you'll get used to it.”

“Over and out.” Trip grinned.

Fitz grimaced. So there was an audio link between the Bus and Garrett's plane. Maybe if he could get to the access panel, he could see if he could salvage some of it. Distance would be an issue, and it might not work at all, but it was at least worth a shot.

He knocked softly on the cockpit door. “Agent May?” He called, “I was just wondering if I could have a look at the audio links if that's okay.” He pushed the door open. Huh. No one there. May must be training or something.

Fitz couldn't help but feel nervous as he tracked the link from the dash to the compartment by the cockpit door. Like he was doing something wrong. Like he was going to get caught. But he wasn't doing anything wrong. He was just doing his just, and *what the hell was this?* “What are you up to?” He mumbled, then almost jumped out of his skin when the cockpit door opened.

May frowned at the sight of him. “What are you doing in here?”

Fitz stared. “I-I was just trying to see if something was up with our audio link from the Hub, but- I-I think it's fine now.” He stuttered, slowly stepping around May to get to the door.

May frowned. “Fitz, is everything okay?”

He nodded vigorously, “Oh yes, totally fine, everything's great, just great.”

He hurried away, feeling surprisingly afraid.

“Fitz!”

He jumped, raising his hands and realising that maybe he should try to sneak Trip's combat training. “What?” It was Skye. Just Skye.

“I was just looking for you.” She said.

“Why?” Fitz asked nervously. “I didn't do anything.”

“What? I didn't say you did.” She gave him a look. “What did you do?”

“I-” Fitz looked back to the cockpit. “I'm not sure. I just- do you know why May would have a dedicated hardline in the cockpit?”

“What?”

“Yeah, dedicated to one receiver. She's not supposed to have that, it's not in any of the plane's schematics. Do you know who she's talking to?”

Skye frowned, trying to understand what Fitz was saying, what it all meant. After a moment, her stomach dropped. Maybe the clairvoyant wasn't a sensate after all. Maybe it was a SHIELD agent. And they had May informing on them. “Cut it.” She said, “You have to cut the line, now Fitz, go!” He hurried off and Skye bit her lip. She wasn't stupid, she knew that May cared about them. There was no way she'd sell them out willingly.

She did the only thing she could. Ran to tell Coulson.

“Put it down May!”

Melinda took a step back, her breath catching when she saw the gun in Coulson's hand.

“It's not what you think, it's just an icer.” She said, trying not to look at Fitz's betrayed eyes.

“This one's not.” He said grimly. “Real gun, real bullets, so start talking.”

May stared. “I-”

“NOW!” He shouted, and she felt trapped.

Melinda knew that she couldn't tell him. If she did it could tear his mind apart. “I can't.” She said, knowing that he wouldn't accept it.

Skye stepped out of a side door, her own gun drawn. Her heart clearly wasn't in it though. “Please, May, just put it down. We can help.”

May met her eyes. She could feel Skye's fear, but also her concern, her love. She swallowed the lump in her throat and held up her hands, letting the icer fall to the ground and kicking it to the stairs. “Look.” She said, “I can explain everything. But not here.”

“Why not here?” Coulson said poisonously. “You have to check with someone first? Using that encrypted line Fitz found in the cockpit?”

She couldn't help but glance at Fitz when Coulson said his name, and something in her heart throbbed when she saw how he shrank away from her. Skye's hands lowered ever so slightly.

Coulson didn't falter. “Who's on the other end of that line?”

May set her jaw. “I can't say.”

“It's okay.” He said softly, but there was a cold to him now that was rarely there. He ignored Izzy and Tori telling him to calm down. “I think I know. It makes sense now, why you've been blocking us out, why you were so scared when you found out that Skye had that connection too.”

May frowned, confused. “What are you talking about?”

“Stop lying to me!” Coulson shouted. “Who's the clairvoyant?! How long have you been spying on us for him?!”

She stared. This was all wrong. “I-” Before she could say anything, the plane shook violently. They all stumbled, falling and flailing. May clung to Lola to keep her feet.

She could see Phil trying to keep his gun on her, still struggling to stand. “What did you do?!” He demanded, “Where are we going?!”

“I don't know!” May cried, “I swear, I don't know what's happening, I didn't do it Phil!”

He glared. “You know how you can prove it.” Phil said, and May's heart dropped.

“Don't.” She said softly. “You know I can't.”

“Yes you can.” He spat. “You just won't. You never do, and I thought it was because you were scared, but that's not it, is it? You just don't want us to see who you've been answering to.”

Skye took a tentative step forwards, holding out her hands, “Coulson.” She said softly, “I think you need to calm down, okay? Just- take a breath.” She inched closer to May. She had never seen Coulson this angry. She had no idea what he would do. But she didn't think he would shoot her.

May spotted Skye's approach. She knew what she was trying to do. She wouldn't let her. She slowly stepped away from Skye. “I swear, I don't know what's happening, you have to believe me.”

“No, I don't.”

Skye rolled her eyes. “Then where is the plane going?”

May shot her a look. “HQ can override control of the avionics, send us anywhere they want. Let me take a look at the controls and maybe-”

“No! No way!” Fitz yelped.

“We're not going anywhere until you give us answers!” Coulson glared, advancing. “Why do you have an encrypted line?!”

“Yeah, and try to shoot me when I found it!”

Skye tried to move between May and Coulson, but found her feet rooted to the ground. May wouldn't look at her. “It was a dedicated line,” May said calmly, “To Director Fury. That's the truth.”

“Fury?” Surprise seemed to pause Coulson's anger. “I haven't been able to get hold of him for weeks.”

Skye swallowed. “You were reporting to him?” On what? On who?

“That's all I can tell you.”

“Oh COME ON!” Fitz yelled. “Just come out with it!”

“I'm under orders!” May snapped. “Fury will tell you.”

Coulson scowled. “You'd better hope he's waiting wherever we're going.” He said. “Or you can get him back on the line.”

“I can't get Fury on the line because Fitz *cut* the line!”

“Skye told me to!”

Coulson took a breath. “Skye.” He said calmly. “I want you to go to the cockpit, tell me where we're going. Fitz, get back in the walls and fix that line.” Before any of them could blink, he had snatched up May's icer and shot her twice in the chest.

Skye yelped and almost fell over. She managed to catch May before she hit the ground. She was angry, but she knew that wouldn't do anything right now. “Yessir.” She muttered, letting Coulson carry May to the interrogation room.

She hated this.

Chapter 19: Beginning of the End

Skye used Trip's pilot skills to access the dash, grimly working out what the hell their trajectory was. She didn't like this. Not one bit.

“Hey,” Trip said softly, visiting, “You okay?”

She shrugged him off. “No.”

Trip sighed. “Yeah.” He said, “I get that. We're here, if there's anything you wanna talk about.”

Skye slammed her hand down on the dash. “She's *not our enemy!*” She snapped. “I know that! I can feel it! *Coulson* can feel it, but he's just...”

Trip put a hand on her shoulder and Skye sagged. “They're different to you and her.” He said. “May's always kept things from you, you're used to it. But they've known each other a long time. Maybe he's not used to secrets.”

“He's a SHIELD agent.”

“Yeah. But secrets from your friends is different. Secrets from someone you trust, who you didn't know was keeping secrets,” He sighed. “It's hard to deal with.”

“He *shot her.”* Skye said, “A-and I don't even know if he was wrong.”

Before Trip could reply, a blaring signal came screeching from the dashboard. Both of them clutched their ears. “What the hell did you do?!” Trip asked, shouting over the noise.

“I don't know!” Skye said, looking at the controls, “I didn't touch anything! It's- it's a signal.” She suddenly felt nervous. “Coming from somewhere else.”

“Tori what the hell is going on?!”

“How am I supposed to know?” She snapped back, “I'm not the one controlling your plane.”

“Well you must be able to find out who is!”

“Yeah, but I'm *busy* Phil, try fixing your own problems for once!”

Tori had just arrived at the Hub and immediately been swept away by Maria Hill to the conference room, attempting to decode the message. Before Phil could say another word, she put up her walls, firmly and effectively blocking him out.

Coulson sighed. “Izzy?”

“Hey, don't look at me.” She said, holding up her hands. “I don't know anything. But feel free to shoot me anyway.” And she turned back to the Iliad.

Phil rolled his eyes, going to the conference room. Skye must have figured it out by now.

“It's an audio code on a loop.” She said, “I need to figure out the key that'll unlock it.”

“Good.” Coulson said, “Any idea where we're headed?”

She nodded. “The Hub. We're getting... beamed right there.”

He swallowed. “Jemma and Trip are there.”

Skye nodded again. “And Tori.”

“Anyone else we know?”

Skye glanced at her tablet. “Maria Hill? I heard you two know each other.”

Phil nodded, then got a sinking feeling. “Maria.” He muttered.

Skye looked up. “What?”

He looked down. “Ever since Bobbi showed up we've all had our theories about who's in her cluster. Factoring age, how well they know Bobbi, that kind of thing.”

Skye frowned. “What, you think she's sensate too? With Bobbi?”

“I think,” Coulson murmured, “That Bobbi's cluster trying to stay secret might be for different reasons than we thought.”

Fitz arrived from the stairs, “What, you think *Maria Hill* is the clairvoyant?”

“It would make sense!” Coulson said, starting to pace. “She always

seems to know more than she's letting on, she's a high ranking SHIELD agent, so she could find this information even if she isn't sensate, and her being in Bobbi's cluster? It's more than possible."

"But why do this *now?* Why give up her position?"

"Hey," Skye interrupted, "I think I got it."

The flickering letters on the screen started to settle. "Out of the shadows, into the light." Coulson read.

HEIL HYDRA

Melinda woke with a start, wincing in pain. "Damn icer." She cursed, the memories coming back to her.

"Mel." Izzy crouched beside her. "You okay?"

She looked down. "I'm fine."

"Don't give me that look." Izzy reprimanded. "I'm not mad at you."

"Why not?" May spat. "I've been lying to you for months."

Izzy stopped herself before she made the mistake of trying to touch her. "I don't own you." She murmured. "You don't owe it to me to always tell the truth. All you've ever owed me, owed any of us, is your best."

Melinda refused to look up.

"Melinda." Izzy said, "We love you. You've saved my ass a hundred times, and maybe they weren't all in ways that I agreed with, but I'm alive because of you. Tori and Phil are too. And maybe you're alive because of us too. I like to think we've helped each other. And none of us are gonna just throw that away."

"You sure about that?" May said coldly. "Because Coulson was..."

"I know." Izzy murmured. "He's hurt, and he's angry. But that doesn't mean that he doesn't care. You know that."

May sighed, her shoulders sagging. "Izzy, I-" Before she could finish, the door opened.

Izzy flickered away when she saw that it was Phil. “You wanted a chance to prove you're on our side, fine.” He said, “Fitz repaired the hardline.”

Phil still had his gun on her. She didn't care. “I'm under orders not to do this when anyone else is around.” May said, ducking her head at the sound of gunshots outside.

Coulson's head twitched at the sound of the agents cutting the hydraulics to the ramp. “We're under attack from our own people.” He said, “Get Fury on the line or I'll send you down there first.”

“The *hell you will!*” Tori said, outraged.

Coulson ignored her, and May spared her a glance before picking up the phone. She'd lied to her too. She pushed Tori back.

The phone rang, twice, three times. That was odd. It had never rung before.

They picked up. *“Hello?”*

Despite everything, Coulson met her eyes, confused. “This is an emergency direct line to Director Fury.” May said. “Where is he?”

There was the longest pause on the other end before the voice replied. *“Director Fury is dead.”*

Before May could react there was the shattering of glass from the cockpit window. She screamed in pain as a bullet punctured her arm. Phil instinctively pulled her back, away from the window, shielding her with his body. For once, she let him. Melinda let herself be pulled back, let herself stay with Phil's arm around her, because this might very well be the last time.

Jemma stared in horror as Agent Weaver vanished from her video call. Her words echoed in her ears.

'Don't trust anyone.'

Trip took a step forwards. “We should barricade ourselves in.” He said.

Jemma backed away. “I- how do I know I can trust you?”

Trip frowned. “Come on,” He said, “You can see everything, remember?” He tapped his head. “See any snakes in there?”

Jemma sighed. “You're right, I'm sorry.” She muttered, “I- suppose I forgot.”

“It's not a good spot to be in.” Trip said, “Something's wrong. Think you can track that signal?”

Jemma nodded. “With Skye's skills? No problem.”

She had been typing for less than a minute when the doors were kicked open.

Four heavily armed guards ran in, weapons drawn. “Hands up!” One cried.

Jemma immediately did so, her heart hammering. Trip looked at her, trying to calm her nerves, before looking at the guard. His eyes narrowed, but he also obeyed.

The next thing they saw, Maria Hill walked into the room. Trip straightened up at the sight, Jemma stared. “Hydra has infiltrated SHIELD,” She said, “At the highest level. We have the support of all surviving level nine and ten agents. Any who resisted have been crossed off. Including Director Fury.” Trip's face twitched. Jemma could feel his denial. “I'm here to offer you a choice. Swear loyalty to Hydra, right now, or you can give your life for an organisation that was *never* what you thought it was.”

Trip could feel Jemma's fear. He could feel how scared she was, how she wished that this was all a bad dream. He wished that too, but it wasn't. He muttered an apology to the three of them, and pulled the knife from his belt, managing to get his arms around one of the guards' necks. “You kill us, one of you goes down too.” He said grimly.

To his surprise, Maria smiled. “Good answer.” She said, the other guards relaxing. “Sorry for the dramatics, it's been a tough day.”

Tori walked into the room, approaching Jemma. “You're okay.” She said gently, putting a hand on her shoulder.

Jemma gasped for air. “Th-that was a test?”

Tori nodded. “One very few have passed, so well done.”

Trip let the guard go, putting his knife back. “Well thanks for the vote of confidence.” He said sarcastically.

Tori rolled her eyes. “I'm not giving anyone my trust today.” She said. “I've had enough friends try to have me killed.”

Maria stepped forwards. “We don't have many people left we can trust.” She said, “Hydra's trying to take the base, so we decided to use their own methods against them. Hide in plain sight.” She nodded to the door. “We have to go, now. We've reinforced the control room.”

Jemma hurried after them. “What about Coulson and the others?”

“They'll have to get themselves in.” Tori said. “Easy enough if Phil can accept the obvious.”

Melinda grunted in pain as Phil dug around in her arm for the bullet. It hurt. He knew it, hell, he was literally hurting himself almost as much. It didn't look like he cared though. “That was his direct line Phil.”

“So it's real.” He said, gripping her arm firmly. “That means it's just you and me. Unless you were reporting to anyone else.”

“I wasn't-” They both grunted in pain as he twisted the tweezers. May sighed when he succeeded in pulling the bullet out.

Phil threw down the tools angrily. “Then come out with it. There's no one else to report to, Fury's dead, SHIELD's Hydra. Orders don't mean anything any more.”

He could feel her apprehension. Even now, May didn't want to tell him. Even after everything she still wouldn't let him in. Because he knew that she was still hiding something.

Melinda clenched her free fist. “He knew you'd want me to join up. He wanted me to keep an eye on you.”

“Looking for what?” He asked, winding bandages around the bullet wound.

May shook her head. This was it. He'd hate her now. “Signs of physical or mental deterioration. To keep him updated. It's simple.”

She felt the realisation come over her and prepared herself for the gut punch.

“Did you know about Tahiti?”

She looked away.

Phil stared. “How could you do that to me? After how much time we've spent together, our years as partners, *decades* with this connection, doesn't that mean anything to you?”

“Phil he said you couldn't know! That it could do more harm.”

“I was giving you a chance when I assembled this team-”

“I assembled this team!” May snapped, tired of his self-righteousness.

That made him stop. “What?”

She swallowed. “It was a double bluff. Best I could do. I assessed what was needed and gave Fury the parameters for the team. He doesn't know about the kids. That was your call. To bring them on the plane.” He looked so lost and betrayed. It hurt more than anything else. “But I didn't do it for Fury, I didn't do it for the kids, Phil, I did it for you, to protect you! I-” She broke off, frantically blocking him from seeing what she was about to say. Melinda swallowed. “You mean a lot to me.” She murmured. “A lot. You don't know what it was like to know you were dead.”

“I would if you'd let me in.”

“I *can't* Phil.” And it was true. Because she knew exactly what would happen if he saw what she did. He would hate her, he would be disgusted, see her for the monster she was.

Phil could feel her self-hatred and guilt and fear. He sighed. “I want to believe you.” He said, “But you've used that against me this whole time.”

Skye ducked into the med bay. “They've stopped firing.” She said, “Fitz cut the hydraulics to the door to hold them off.”

“It won't stop them for long.” Coulson said, “We need to get off the plane with everything we can.”

Skye nodded. “Trip and Jemma are with Tori and Maria Hill. They're not Hydra, but the guys outside are.”

“I'd hope so.” Coulson said, “Otherwise I'd be kind of confused.”

It didn't take them long to make their way through the hordes of Hydra agents. Skye had never been more grateful to be in a cluster as when she and Fitz both utilised Trip's combat and shooting skills. Not to mention her being able to use May's martial arts, though she felt her shrink away.

She was going to give Coulson a piece of her mind when they got out of this. There was no point in cuffing May. None at all. It was putting all of them in danger just because *he* had trust issues.

May felt Skye's anger and frustration. It was okay. It was the time for it. Even if she knew that most of that frustration was aimed at her.

She deserved it.

When the four of them fought their way to the control room, they found multiple guns aimed at their heads. Coulson held up his hands. “We're not Hydra.” He said, totally worn out and bloody, like all of them.

Maria rolled her eyes. “I never would have guessed.” She said sarcastically, opening the doors. “Get your ass in here Phil.”

He coughed as they made it into the room. He gave Tori a nod, but she ignored him in favour of breaking May out of her cuffs. He got it. She was mad at him. But he wasn't going to apologise for being rightfully angry with Melinda.

He turned to Maria. “How far does it go?”

Her look spoke horrifying volumes.

Skye spent her time with her cluster, doing her best to help them get the Bus working again. She couldn't take the tension between Coulson and May. She hated it, and she knew that May knew.

It was the quiet to her that killed Skye the most. May had always blocked them out, but she did so firmly. She placed her walls like a line in the sand, which no one dared cross. Now she shied away from any contact. Mental or otherwise. The last think Skye had ever thought May could be was meek.

Skye didn't know who Talbot was, but she could see the others' worry, as well as veiled annoyance.

Tori approached the four of them as they worked on the plane. “You're leaving.”

Trip glanced at the others, then stepped forwards. “That's right ma'am.” He said, “Coulson gave us orders to get ready.”

Tori nodded. “Got room for one more?”

Jemma beamed, and Fitz banged his head on the Bus as he looked up. “Of course!” Jemma said warmly.

Tori nodded. “Good.” She said, “I'll clean up the broken glass.”

Skye watched her walk up the stairs and, after a moment, followed.

She shuffled behind Tori for a moment, trying to work out what to say. Out of everyone in their parent cluster, she knew Tori the least.

“Are you getting anything from Mel?” Tori asked, surprising her.

Skye shook her head. “No. I- she's blocking me out.”

Tori sighed, sweeping some of the glass from the conference table. “Not surprising. She always does this when she's upset.”

Skye swallowed. “I wanna help her.” She said softly, using the broom to sweep some pieces into a pile on the ground. “I just... I don't really know how. I don't know if she wants to see me.”

“She does.” Tori said. “I can tell you that much. She likes you.”

Skye bit her lip. “If it wasn't for me- none of this wouldn't have happened.”

Tori rolled her eyes. “You didn't bring Hydra back. You're not that good.”

Skye looked up briefly. “You know what I mean.”

Tori shook her head. “Secrets have a way of coming out eventually.” She said, “It's not your fault Skye. You just did what you think was right.”

Skye emptied the dustpan into the bin. “I just feel bad.” She muttered. “I-I wish I could help.”

Tori sighed. “I think you can.” She said, “But give it a little time.”

Skye opened the door to the cockpit, coordinates in hand. “We've got somewhere to go.” She said breathlessly, “Coulson's badge was... well, we've got coordinates.”

May nodded. “Let me see.” She said quietly.

Skye silently handed her the notepad. “It's in Canada.” She said after watching May stare at the page for a minute.

May nodded, reaching for the controls. “Should take about four hours.”

“Cool.” Skye muttered, quickly visiting Coulson to tell him. After taking a second to think, she slipped into the copilot's seat.

Melinda glanced at Skye out of the corner of her eye. Her chest felt tight. “You can go.” She said.

Skye nodded. “I know.” She said, “But... I'd like to stay. If that's okay with you.”

May said nothing. She didn't know what to say. Skye clearly felt bad for her, but she didn't have the energy to snap at her for it. She didn't want to argue. She didn't need anyone else hating her right now.

Skye took a deep breath. It hurt that SHIELD was gone. Every time she had just become a part of something it seemed like it was taken away. She knew that she shouldn't be surprised at this point, but it still stung. She just hoped that she hadn't lost her friends too. Her cluster. May.

May could feel the turbulence in Skye's mind. She wanted to help, but she knew that she couldn't. She didn't deserve to have this connection. With Phil, Tori, Izzy. Skye. She didn't deserve any of them.

Skye twitched as she felt another wave of pain wash over May. She couldn't let it happen any more. Perfectly content with getting shouted at, Skye gently untangled the matted strings of May's thoughts and worries. She was slow, she was soft, and she hoped that May wouldn't notice.

She could see May's countenance change ever so slightly. Her shoulders relaxed, her breathing became slower. Skye withdrew carefully. She didn't know if May wanted her to know she was upset. She knew May didn't want her in her head, but she was just worried.

Skye knew that that was okay. She was allowed to be worried about her friend.

Melinda swallowed the lump in her throat. Despite everything, the lies, endangering her, Skye still cared about her. She took a steady breath. “Thank you.” She murmured.

Skye held her breath as she felt their connection open that tiny bit. May was opening the door, just a little. She smiled. “No problem.”

Chapter 20: Providence

Skye didn't like Providence very much. There was a chill to it that wasn't just the cold seeping through the doors. The fake windows made her feel uncomfortable. Like she was in prison. Not to mention the super fun polygraph test that insisted she give answers. All of them, actually. Thankfully Eric hadn't asked any questions along the lines of 'do you share a psychic connection with anyone?' or they would have been in real trouble.

Skye felt that familiar pang of hurt when she accidentally visited May during her interrogation, just long enough to tell Eric that the only reason she was here was Coulson.

She just felt so cold, all the way down to her bones. Everyone was weirdly quiet, any noise in Providence echoed way too far and too easily, every wall chilled her to touch. Even the food, though heated, felt cold.

Maybe that was why Skye didn't fully wake up when she was first hit by a cold wind as she slept. She shivered, looking around blearily. “What's going on?”

May cursed. She had blocked off her own cluster, Tori and Izzy and Phil, but Skye had always managed to worm her way through her defences. “Nothing.” She assured, visiting to the bunk in which Skye was curled up. “Go back to sleep.”

Skye's eyes fixed on her, and some part of her brain noted May's attire. “You going somewhere?”

Even knowing that she had to, knowing that there was no other way, knowing how every time Phil looked at her it broke her heart, Melinda felt guilty. “Yeah.” She said softly, smoothing Skye's hair back. “But I'll come back. There's just something I have to do.”

Skye looked up at her, willing herself not to cry. Not to beg May to stay. “I don't want you to go.” She whispered.

Somehow, May managed to smile. “You know I can never go far.”

Skye swallowed. “Be careful.”

May nodded. “I promise.” She murmured. “I'll see you soon. Go to

sleep.”

“I'll miss you.”

Melinda sighed softly. “I'll miss you too.” She said softly, then, seeing her eyes start to droop, went back to her mission. She had a long walk ahead of her.

There was a moment when Skye woke that she forgot everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. A moment when she thought that the cold was from the air conditioning which Coulson always left on, that the darkness was because they were parked in some garage or flying in the middle of the night.

Then she remembered.

Skye looked around and groaned. It was real. They were at some base in the middle of the snow in Canada. At least she could still feel her cluster, safe and alive and asleep. She should get up. Training would make her feel better.

Training. With May. Her dream from the night before came back and Skye's stomach dropped. No. “May?” She sat up, trying to reach out to her. “May?”

But there was no reply.

Maria Hill ducked into a back alley, drawing her weapon. Part of her was almost glad of a possible attack. She needed to hurt something. Still, she couldn't help but feel relieved at the familiar voice.

“We need to talk Agent Hill.”

Maria's breath caught in he throat. “May.” She said, letting some irritation seep into her voice. “A phone call would have done.” She holstered her weapon, “But I appreciate the discretion.”

May's eyes were narrowed. “I thought you could use the night off. They must hate that you're working for Stark.”

Maria shrugged. “It's protection, for now at least. Nice to have his army of lawyers behind us. Wanna join?”

“I've got my own team, thanks.” May said coldly, but there was a hint of satisfaction in her voice that made Maria pause. “But it looks like

you've been part of *that* this whole time."

Maria frowned. "I don't know what you're talking about."

A smirk tugged at May's lips. "I think you do." She said. "Does Fury know?"

"Fury's dead." Maria said flatly, "And I don't know what the hell you're on about."

May only smirked wider, then promptly vanished.

Maria jumped, "God*damnit!"*

Melinda stepped out from behind a wall. "You wouldn't have been able to see me if you weren't sensate." She said. "You're in Bobbi's cluster?"

Maria rolled her eyes and nodded begrudgingly. "Surprised it took you so long."

May shrugged. "We always had theories. Never had much need to test them before."

Maria crossed her arms. "What do you want?"

"It's not me." May said. "It's Coulson. He needs help. And he won't listen to me." Maria raised an eyebrow and she continued. "He needs answers. You need to give him answers."

Maria shook her head. "You wanna know who was in charge of the TAHITI project." She grimaced. "I'm sorry May, I don't know. It was high up, Fury kept it to himself." She sighed. "When I asked, he said he buried that information when he decided not to bury Coulson."

May rolled her eyes. "More riddles. You want to ask him for me?"

"He's dead May. And if he was sensate, he wasn't in my cluster.""

She smirked. "I'll believe it when I see it."

Tori wasn't talking to him. He couldn't get through to May at all. What could possibly make Phil feel worse?

A moment after the thought occurred to him, an angry Skye stormed up to him and Tori at the bar. "How could you do that?!" She

demanded furiously. “You- you... you *made her leave!”*

Coulson set his jaw. “May chose to leave, Skye. I didn't make her do anything.” She had left them. Even her talk about caring about them was a lie.

Skye shoved him and Coulson stared, shocked. Skye didn't seem to care. “God, will you just get off your high fucking horse?! Your friend lied to protect you, boo freaking hoo. I know it's *really* tough having people who actually care about you, I hope you pull through.”

Jemma appeared behind her, putting a gentle hand on her back. “Easy.” She soothed, and Skye took a breath.

Tori crossed her arms. “You really think she left because she doesn't care?” She asked.

Phil grit his teeth. He knew that he had hurt her. Part of him wanted to. A lot of him had wanted to. “I-” He sighed, deflating. “I just wanted to hurt her like she hurt me.”

Skye barely held herself back from shouting again, but it was Tori who spoke. “Well, congratulations.” She said. “You did. Do you feel better?”

His emotions were spelled out more clearly on his face than Tori could feel. Now he was scared. Guilty. Sorry. “Tori-” *What do I do?*

She decided to throw him a bone. “Let her go for now. Give her time.” She knew that Phil would immediately try to talk to Melinda, try to make her come back. She needed time alone right now. “We have other things to worry about. Like the Fridge, and Garrett.”

Skye quietly left, trying to nudge at her connection with May. She just wanted to talk to her, let her know that she could come back when she wanted to. If she wanted to.

For the first time, however, she couldn't get a peep from May. She had blocked them all out entirely.

Phil sat alone in his temporary office. He sighed, head in his hands. He knew he'd messed up. He just hadn't cared. For whatever reason, he'd stopped caring about his best friend. He'd taken for granted that she would do anything for him, including being the punching bag. And now she was gone.

“I'm sorry.” He murmured. “I know I crossed a line, I... I know you can't hear me Melinda, but... I'm sorry.”

Phil blinked and the world tilted. “May?” Was that his name? Written on something?

In an instant he was gone, and any hope vanished. He bit his lip. “Okay.” He murmured. “I'll be here though, if you change your mind.” It might have been his imagination, but Phil thought he felt a twinge of longing though their connection. Then that was gone too.

Phil sighed. He hadn't really expected any different, and he knew that wanting Melinda to come back now was selfish. He just missed her. He had been missing her for years. “Stay safe.” He murmured.

“Phil?” The familiarly not Melinda voice dragged Coulson out into the woods.

“Izzy?”

There was clear relief on her face when she saw him standing next to her in the snow. “Oh thank God.”

Phil looked around. She was surrounded by non SHIELD soldiers and... “General Talbot?!”

Izzy looked nervous. “They know where the base is Phil, you have to get out of there. They'll be there in twenty minutes.”

“What about you?”

“Don't worry about me, I'll be fine. You just need to get your team out.”

“Izzy, you *are* my team.”

She groaned. “Phil I swear to God, I don't need you being a hero right now!”

Phil set his jaw. “We need to stick together right now Izzy. Everyone's hunting us, we need each other.”

Izzy bit her tongue to keep from snapping about Melinda. “Get to the plane.” She said, defeated. “Be ready to take off. If I'm not there two minutes after the hanger door opens you leave without me.”

“Okay.” He wasn't sure he would do it, but there was no more time to

argue. “Good luck.”

“You too.”

It wasn't difficult for Izzy to drop a smoke bomb and kill the lights. Running through the smoke to get to the plane was a bit more difficult, but she still made it just as Trip was taking off.

“Izzy!” Skye cried, helping her to her feet. “Hey!”

Izzy laughed breathlessly. “Hey kid.” She grinned, hugging her tightly. “Long time no see.”

“Yeah.” Skye agreed, hugging her back. “Not gonna lie, I kind of wanted you around the last few days.”

Izzy drew away. “Well I'm here now.” She said. “Where are we heading?”

Skye shrugged. “Hell if I know. Trip's flying and Coulson's... trying, but I'm pretty sure May's stonewalling him.” She looked down. “She's blocking me out.”

Izzy followed her up the stairs. “It's not personal.” She said. “She just needs time to herself.”

“I know.” Skye murmured. “I just- I miss her.” She laughed. “It's so dumb, it's been like a day, but... I really miss her.”

Izzy offered a smile. “I know.” She said softly. “Don't worry, she'll be back before you know it.”

Skye sighed. She wished she could believe that. Before the two could reach the cockpit where Skye knew Coulson and Tori were, she noticed Fitz and Jemma in the common room. Rather than following Izzy, she diverted from their course to sit with them on the couch. The moment Skye sat down Fitz wrapped an arm around her shoulders and Jemma snuggled close to her other side.

Skye smiled. “How did I ever get by without you guys?” She asked.

Fitz chuckled. “Same way we got by without you.”

“Poorly.” Jemma completed.

Trip suddenly visited, jammed between Jemma and Skye. “So... are

hug piles a normal thing with you guys, or...”

“No.” Skye muttered, embarrassed, at the same moment that Jemma and Fitz said, “Yes.”

Trip laughed. “Nah, it's cool.” He said. “I'm down.”

Fitz sniggered. “You realise that Skye's basically a sloth, right?”

Skye blushed. “Shut up.”

“It is a reasonable comparison Skye.” Jemma said, smiling politely. “You spend most of your time hanging from people.”

Skye groaned. “Oh my God I hate you guys.”

Trip laughed. “I'd believe you if you weren't still in the cuddle pile.”

Skye huffed. “Don't call it that.”

“You can't stop me.”

Phil was half asleep in the cockpit when a voice startled him. A voice he'd been wanting to hear for two days. “Phil.”

He sat up, immediately alert. “Melinda? Where are you, are you okay?”

Phil immediately appeared in the seat beside her, and the desperation to him made Melinda feel like she might cry. Not now though. They weren't doing this now. “I've got it.” She gestured to the laptop. “I found the intel on Tahiti.”

Phil didn't even look at the computer. “I don't care about that.” He said. “Are you safe?” He glanced around the car, “Have you been eating?”

“Phil, please.” She sounded so tired. “Just... watch the damn video.”

Melinda didn't want to do this now. She didn't want to talk about who was forgiving who or what they were going to do next. She was just too tired.

The video only made her more tired.

“Huh.” Phil said from beside her.

Melinda watched him out of the corner of her eye. Waiting for him to move. “What now?” She didn't want to talk about this. But Phil could be going insane.

Oh God. *Skye* could be going insane.

Before her mind could run wild with the possibilities, two arms wrapped tightly around her. “Thank you.” Phil murmured. “For doing this.”

May shrugged, not moving to return the embrace. “It's okay.”

“I'm sorry I hurt you.”

“It's okay.”

“No,” Now Phil did pull away. “It's not. I was cruel. I was horrible to you. I-” He sighed. “Will you come back?”

“You know I will.”

“Do you want to?” Now she was silent, and Phil felt terrible. “I-I promise I'll make it up to you. I don't know how, but...”

May shook her head. “It's okay Phil. I understand why you were mad.”

“I trust you.” He said. “I do. I'm sorry I forgot that.”

“Apology accepted.” May said, just trying to end his damned feelings talk.

Phil must have picked up on that surface thought, because he smiled. “Don't pretend you don't love the touchy feely stuff.”

“I hate it. You know that.”

“You know I can see into your mind, right?” When he caught the momentary thrill of alarm, he conceded. “A little bit. But enough to know that you love it.”

Melinda hesitated. It was just them, Tori and Izzy were asleep at the motel. And the last two days had been some of the loneliest in her life, with no cluster, none of the kids, no partner, no SHIELD. In a moment she let herself visit his motel room and cuddle up to him. “Don't tell anyone.” She warned.

Phil smiled, wrapping his arms around her again and pressing a kiss to

the top of her head. “Our secret.” He murmured. “I'll see you soon.”

End Notes

Here's a bit of a summary if you're feeling lost.
A Sensate is a person who maintains a telepathic and empathetic connection with other sensates, usually in their group, or with those outside a cluster. Although a sensate is essentially human, "one small genetic mutation" allows sensates to be emotionally and mentally linked. This connection allows them to share each other's knowledge and skills, among others. Sensates have two birthdays; the first when they were physically born, and the second, when they were reborn as sensates. A cluster's connection is activated during this second birth.

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